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The Bangwa Queen: Interpretations, Constructions, and Appropriations of Meaning of the Esteemed Ancestress Figure from the Cameroon Grassfields

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The Bangwa Queen:
Interpretations, Constructions, and Appropriations of Meaning of the Esteemed Ancestress
Figure from the Cameroon Grassfields

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
and
The Division of Languages and Literature

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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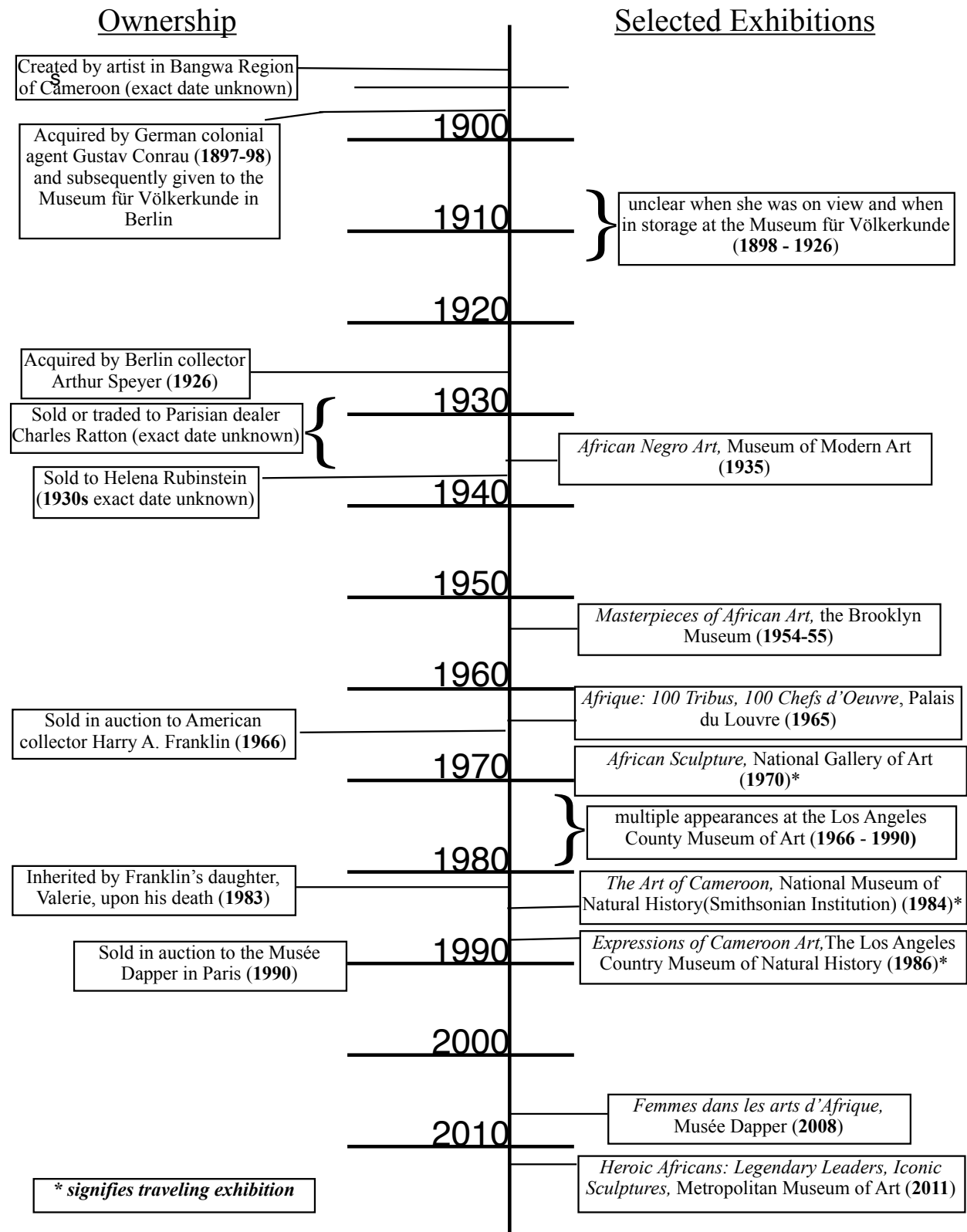
To my siblings— Vincent, Maria, and Michael for keeping it all in perspective

And to my parents— for answering every childhood cry of “I’m bored” with “Go read a book.”

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Timeline



A Note On Pronouns

I prefer to use the feminine pronouns “she/her” in reference to the Bangwa figure because she (the statue) was made to be the embodiment of a real individual. In fact, in their original context, *lefem* figures were called by the name of the particular ancestor they each embody and were treated as those people would have been treated (Harter 1986:313). She (the statue) is neither human nor object but occupies a spiritual space in between the two. Because of this, *lefem* figures are not inanimate and therefore the pronoun “it” seems ill-fitting. I do, however, occasionally use the pronoun “it” in reference to the figure when I feel that “she” is confuses the meaning of the sentence.

Introduction: the Bangwa “Queen” & the Hottentot Venus

London, 1810: Saartjie Baartman leaves her homeland for Europe. European audiences gather to gawk at the woman from South Africa. She is dubbed the “Hottentot Venus” and a freak of nature. Her anatomical proportions draw crowds and are exaggerated in advertisements and drawings, such as the one pictured below (Fig. 1). A week after arriving in London she was already the talk of the town. As she became more famous, she became more in demand and performed her singing and dancing routine multiple times a day, six days out of the week (Holmes 2007:42).

Berlin, 1899: A series of objects arrive at the Museum für Völkerkunde from the Grassfields of Cameroon. The German colonial agent and first European in Bangwa Grassfields territory, Gustav Conrau had collected these objects, mostly from the city of Fontem in the Bangwa region, between 1897 and 1898. Among the group of Grassfields objects is the to yet-to-be-famous Bangwa “Queen” figure, a wooden sculpture of a woman caught in movement. She will eventually be traded or sold to various collectors such as Arthur Speyer (1926), Charles Ratton (late 1920s, early 1930s), Helena Rubinstein (1930s), and Harry A. Franklin (1966) before ending up in the Musée Dapper in Paris (1990).

On the surface, the two stories outlined above seem to have few similarities. Saartjie Baartman and the Bangwa figure left different corners of Africa almost nine decades apart. Baartman, a human being, became famous almost overnight in Europe. The Bangwa figure, a sculpture, gradually acquired notoriety among African art historians. However, Baartman’s story does parallel the Bangwa sculpture in a few ways. The similarities and differences between the two will provide a new way to consider the Bangwa figure, the focus of this study. First of all,



Fig. 1. 1824 illustration of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman by Léon Wailly and Jacques Christophe Werner, now in the French national natural history museum (Paris). Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed April 7, 2014).

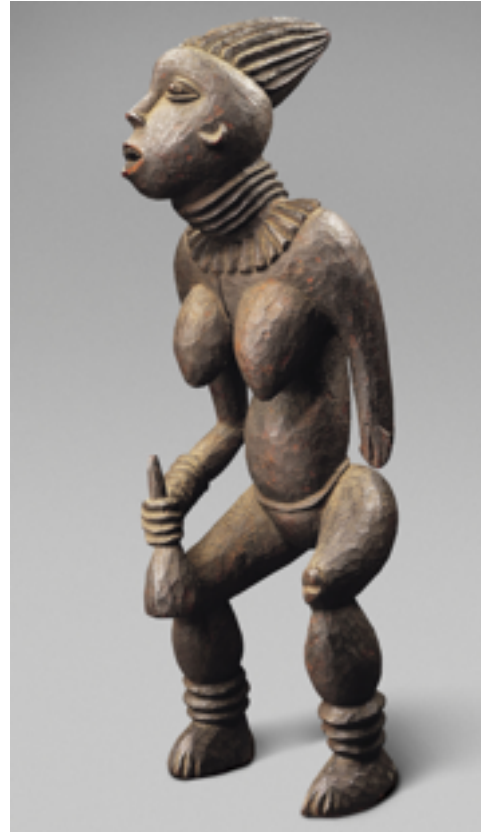


Fig. 2. Female *lefem* figure, Bangwa, Grassfields region, Cameroon. Late 19th century, Wood, pigments, H. 85 cm. Musée Dapper, Paris. From: *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Alisa LaGamma, 2011. Figure 113.

both have been assigned multiple names, which confuse their respective (and multiple) identities as an individual artwork and as an individual woman. Secondly, both were put on display for a European audience as curiosities and as ethnographic specimens. Thirdly, both obtained perceived notions of fame in conjunction with their associations with prominent people or museums. Finally, both are made to stand for certain, generalized tropes but are also expected to maintain a one-of-a-kind status in terms of physical appearance. For example, curator Dr. Alisa LaGamma's discussion in the exhibition catalog for *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* glosses over the purpose of Bangwa ancestral figures in general, therefore the specific

Bangwa “Queen” figure is assumed to fulfill the trope of *any* Bangwa ancestral figure. However, LaGamma provides an in-depth account of the figure’s career outside of the African continent (LaGamma 2011:127-128).¹ By framing my study of the Bangwa figure in terms of Saartjie Baartman’s life, I will be able to more fully explore the question of meaning. What does the Bangwa figure mean in a Western context? What is her role in Western museums, collecting, and African art history now that she has spent over a century outside of Cameroon?

The first similarity between the two is naming. Although Baartman and the Bangwa figure are both recognized by a variety of names, there is one obvious difference: Baartman, as Holmes states, called herself Saartjie. The wooden Bangwa figure, quite plainly, does not have the ability to speak for herself and thus people are forced to name and label the figure, even though the figure would have been called by a real name among the Bangwa. Naming is such a concern to Rachel Holmes, the author of *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus*, that she begins her book not with a preface but with “A Note on Naming,” just as I do with “A Note on Pronouns”. Baartman was known by her stage name, the Hottentot Venus, as previously mentioned, and is also still known among some as Sara(h) Bartmann. Holmes chooses to use Baartman’s Afrikaans name, Saartjie Baartman, because that is how the woman referred to herself. Holmes also admits that Baartman “may have been given a Khoisan name at birth”, because Baartman was Khoi (Hottentot) in origin. That name was forever lost, even to Baartman herself (Holmes 2007:xiii).

¹ This is not a critique of LaGamma but is an exploration of the field of African art. LaGamma can only write on information that is available. Not much is known about the use of this specific figure in Bangwa society and therefore inferences must be made from general knowledge of Bangwa culture. However, this study attempts to illuminate the consequences of our gaps in knowledge. A more in-depth discussion on this is provided in the following chapter. Acknowledging these consequences will hopefully foster discussion on alternative approaches to African art.

The Bangwa figure once had a very real name; she was made to represent a living person at the time of her conception (Brain and Pollock 1971:64). The fact that her real identity is unknown is at the root of the naming crisis. Here, the parallel between Baartman and the Bangwa figure is clear: their original names will never be known. Does this loss of their birth names matter? Holmes asserts: “As is usually the case with such iconic figures, there is some debate over her proper naming” (Holmes 2007:xiv). Re-naming is common. But are these instances of re-naming or of mis-naming? How writers and museums deal with this fragmentary knowledge is worth a second look. It is impossible to re-name without altering the meaning of the original person’s or object’s name. However, writers and museums must choose some degree of mis-naming when referring to pieces such as the Bangwa figure. Like the title of “Hottentot Venus”, any name given to the Bangwa figure acts as an identifier, whether it is a case of re-naming or of mis-naming.

There are limitations to even the most neutral naming attempts. For example, I use the identifier “Bangwa figure” throughout this study, but such a title does not showcase the role that the figure would have had among the Bangwa as an embodiment of a real and respected woman. Other names attributed to the statue are perhaps more descriptive and appear to be as neutral as possible: “Female Memorial Figure” (Stepan 2001:86), “Commemorative Statue of a Princess” (Bassani 2005:367), “Commemorative Figure of a Priestess” (LaGamma 2011:127), “Bangwa Figure of a Woman” (Rubinstein 1966:154), and “Female Commemorative Figure” (Homerger, Geary, and Koloss 2008:160) have all appeared in art historical texts. All of these titles, with the exception of “Bangwa Figure of a Woman”, were published after the turn of the millennium, proving that there is no standard designation or even a general consensus of

naming her. The meaning of the figure is construed differently with each naming, evident in the varying connotations between “princess”, “priestess”, and every other descriptor in between.

Commonly, she is referred to as the Bangwa “Queen” due to her “regal demeanor” (Northern 1986:20). In reality, she was probably not a queen. Though the original use of the queen title is unknown, many newspapers—such as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*—have used this title as recently as 2011.² Gustav Conrau, the German colonial agent who acquired the figure in Cameroon at the end of the nineteenth century, recorded that she was called *njuindem* in the Bangwa language. A *njuindem*, which translates to “woman of God”, is a woman who has birthed twins or a special child and acts as priestess of the earth (Brain and Pollock 1971:123-124). The woman depicted in the sculpture undoubtedly held a status position among the Bangwa, evident both in her title as *njuindem* and in her elaborate necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. Therefore, a re-naming of the figure relies not only on language translation but also on visual translation of her appearance. Her physical appearance helps in understanding the importance of the term *njuindem*. However, I recognize that the average Western museum audience would not know the term *njuindem* and would likely not know which physical signifiers, such as her hairstyle and jewelry, make the figure different from other Bangwa figures. A history of the Bangwa figure is missing due to a lack of documentation.

² In the 1990 accounts of the figure’s sale, the *Los Angeles Times* placed quotation marks around the “Bangwa Queen” title while the *New York Times* did not. However, the *New York Times* did add quotation marks in 2011. The art auction house Christie’s also uses quotation marks. The addition of quotation marks—a tool which I use throughout this study—signifies that the writer is aware that this title is somewhat arbitrary. I continue to use the term throughout this study purposely to (1) draw attention to the wrongful term used by others and (2) because it is a common way to identify the figure. Because no other name is used as often, many know her as the “Bangwa ‘Queen’ figure” with the added quotations around *Queen*. It is possible that the title of *Queen* is used to denote her as part of a pair with the Bangwa *King* figure (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), which Conrau also collected at the end of the 19th century. Issues arise in pairing titles of *King* and *Queen* because those titles function within a Western monarchal context. The Bangwa title of *Fon* is translated to *King*, but Bangwa monarchy did not have a queen equivalent. A *Fon* had many wives, some of which were titled or favorite wives, but there was no single queen. (see Brain 1977)

Therefore, naming of her is based on the small amount of documentation that does exist, along with her physical appearance. Mis-naming the figure with the Western monarchal term “queen” can be a conscious act to emphasize her importance in familiar terms for a Western audience.

A key distinction between Baartman and the Bangwa figure is that in Bangwa society, a person’s title or role was more central to her existence than her personal name. The woman represented by the figure was the mother of twins or a special child—an important role—so we can therefore assume that she was not a junior kinsman but rather highly regarded senior kinsman. In Bangwa society, only the junior kinsmen are addressed by their given names because “there is a strong taboo against uttering the name of an elder, unless the prefix *o* (mother) or *mbe* is added” (Brain 1972:51). Moreover, mothers of twins were treated as “heroines” and the twins themselves as “little gods” in Bangwa society (Brain 1977:42). Thus, her importance lies in her role as a mother in Bangwa society and not in her name. So perhaps it is not all that detrimental that her real name is unknown. However, it is still problematic to use “queen” as a placeholder because it implies that the woman represented would have held a ruling position similar to that of an English queen.

The implications and associations that accompany Western created names must be considered. Both the Bangwa figure and Saartjie Baartman have roles linked to their names—albeit sometimes fabricated ones—in the West. Using the title “Bangwa Queen” makes the figure one part exotic (Bangwa) and one part regal (Queen). Saartjie Baartman was one part exotic as well (Hottentot) and one part sexual (Venus). The issues with the second part of their fabricated names, “Queen” and “Venus”, respectively, are obvious. The use of the word “queen” has already been discussed in terms of its association with Western monarchy. The use of the Roman

goddess' name "Venus" was "simply a synonym for sex" (Holmes 2007:4). Both "queen" and "Venus" are gendered terms, and both queens and the Roman goddess Venus are symbols of beauty, elegance, and power.

The first parts of their Western names are slightly more complex, in that they appear to be neutral terms but are not. One could argue that Bangwa and Hottentot are merely descriptors. How else can they be distinguished from women of any other part of the world? This is true, and I can propose no alternative geographic naming, especially for the Bangwa figure. However, the contexts in which these names are/were understood are worth exploring. First of all, "Bangwa" is a partially invented term. It is not indicative of a particular ethnic, political, or tribal group. Alternatively, the term Bangwa was used by the British "specifically for those nine Bamileke chiefdoms accidentally caught on the British side of the French-British trusteeship boundaries" in colonial Cameroon (Brain 1972:9). The name, Bangwa, refers only to a specific geographic region, but the phrase "Bangwa peoples" assumes a certain cultural coherency between all nine chiefdoms. Similarities exist, but the false construction of grouping the nine chiefdoms together as one ethnic group or tribe must be acknowledged. While it is speculated that the Bangwa figure came from the city of Fontem, it is only a speculation (Northern 1986:20). Therefore, she must be generalized as Bangwa. Similarly, falsehoods about Hottentot women also existed. Hottentot, the European term for Khoi, carried racist undertones. Hottentot women were believed to be crass in sexual deviancy and smoking habits and to possess "enormous buttocks and strangely elongated labia" (Holmes 2007:4). Therefore, even such seemingly neutral terms that describe the geographic origin of the sculpture and the woman are in reality quite charged. Both are framed within a Western (colonial) understanding of the continent of Africa. As unsatisfying as it

is, there seems to be no way to move past the colonial naming of the Bangwa. Scholars and curators must recognize the colonial aspect of the name in order to provide a historical context through which readers and museum audiences can interpret the figure, as I do here. The meaning of the figure cannot be understood only within her original context but must be explored through her interactions with the West, beginning with the way in which colonial realities have shaped her role in the West. How has she been interpreted through the colonial lens?

Part of the connotation that goes along with the names “Bangwa Queen” and “Hottentot Venus” is due to the fact that both were treated as curiosities and ethnographic specimens, the second similarity between the two. Before her career singing and dancing on stage, Baartman’s manager and master (in South Africa, she was legally his servant), Alexander Dunlop, proposed her sale to William Bullock. Bullock owned the Museum of Natural Curiosities in London. Although Bullock refused Dunlop’s proposal, the offer makes it clear that Dunlop found no problem with treating Baartman as an object. He brought her to London as a spectacle fit for a natural history museum (Holmes 2007:35-36). Four years later, in 1814, Baartman had become famous but was not considered any less of an ethnographic specimen. This time, she was put on display at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, where she would later be dissected after her death for “scientific purposes” (Holmes 2007:75-76, 94). This marks a change in her social life as an object instead of as a person. Anthropological racism and cultural misconceptions of the time stripped Baartman not only of her clothing, but also of her personhood.³

³ For more information on American and British racist anthropological practices of the nineteenth century, see *Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology* (Gruber 1970); *Anthropology: Its Achievements and Future* (Lévi-Strauss 1966); and *Before Social Anthropology: Assays on the History of British Anthropology* (Urry 1993).

To link this to the Bangwa “Queen” figure, it must be understood that in her original context, the figure was not merely an object. She occupies a space that is unfamiliar to many in the Western world, between the human and the spiritual. Ancestor figures, such as the Bangwa “Queen” are temporary abodes of spirits during sacrifices, but they are grounded in the human social world *not* the spiritual world (Brain and Pollock 1971:57; Northern 1984:38). Therefore, she is more than an object even though she is not human. However like Baartman, she is forced into objectification once she leaves the continent of Africa. In fact, it is arguable that her objectification into an ethnographic specimen started the moment that Conrau laid eyes on her before she even left the Cameroon Grassfields, for objects from the Grassfields “were popular [in Europe]...for their status as trophies and curiosities or as material for cultural-historical documentation” (Hombberger, Geary, and Koloss 2008:15). The Bangwa figure was undeniably regarded as an ethnographic specimen and not as art in the Museum für Völkerkunde, where she spent the first twenty eight years of her career outside of Africa. This is true of all African art objects in Europe at that time. The first time African objects were displayed on their own as art was in private collections in the 1910s at the “291” Gallery and Marius de Zayas’ Modern Gallery, both in New York (Berzock and Clarke 2011:6). Likewise, in the 1935 exhibition catalog for *African Negro Art*, curator James Johnson Sweeney asserts that between 1897 and 1904 W.D. Webster, an “auctioneer of ethnographical specimens” did not give proper attention to “those pieces we recognize today [in 1935] as among the most important in collections such as that of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin” (Sweeney 1935).

My point is not to undermine the suffering of Saartjie Baartman by equating it to the case of the Bangwa “Queen” figure. Rather, I am recognizing that the history of the field of African

art studies in the West is part of an extensive cultural outlook by the West on all things “African”. The way in which the Bangwa figure was originally treated in Europe follows the framework of how Baartman was treated as an ethnographic specimen. Although the figure was brought to Europe nearly ninety years after Baartman was, both fell into a category of curiosity. This curiosity of the European audience stemmed from their “novelty-hungry” attitudes (Holmes 2007:28). Sub-Saharan and southern Africa was framed as a grand abyss of mystery, evident in the publication of Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*. The novel was published in 1899, a mere year or two after Conrau collected the Bangwa figure, and romantically painted Africa as an untamed curiosity.

This sentiment of mystery and exoticism opens the door to ethnographic endeavors in the nineteenth century. In his famous 1970 essay *Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology*, anthropologist Jacob W. Gruber argues that the early ethnographic obsession with the exotic was rooted in a fear that the “savage” would disappear with the colonial spread of “civilization”. Such ethnographies of the eighteenth century “came to be used traditionally either to explain man’s nature or to unravel his history—goals that often were not readily separated”. The “exotic” people being studied were seen as a mystery and as “civilized” man’s historical past. Until the discovery of DNA in the 1950s, the cultural “other” was also viewed as the biological “other” (Gruber 1970). “Otherness” was therefore an obscurity, fit only to be studied by scientific means. This resulted from a European effort to make sense of the new words they encountered. The treatment of Saartjie Baartman and of the Bangwa figure as ethnographic and scientific specimens is a part of anthropology’s gruesome past.

This institutional racism has, in some instances, allowed for the perpetuation of stereotypes that place Baartman and the Bangwa figure within a general category of sexualized African women. However, at the same time that Baartman and the Bangwa figure are expected to fulfill overarching symbolic roles, they are also imagined as maintaining a certain uniqueness. For example, operating within the perception of the sexualized African woman, Baartman was viewed not so much as an individual to her European audience but rather as “the epitome of potent European fantasies about African sexuality” (Holmes 2007:53). The Bangwa figure’s body also became a trope for African femininity during the 1930s. A prime example is Man Ray’s two photographs (1934) of the figure posed next to an unidentified nude female model, discussed in the third chapter. Wendy Grossman, in *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*, explains that the photographs illustrate “how context dictated the manner in which African objects became foils for representations of the racialized female body at this time” (Grossman, Bari, and Bonnell 2009:135). While the model’s arm is interlaced between the figure’s legs in both photographs, the more widely circulated photograph draws more attention to sexual notions of the body by highlighting the breasts of the figure and the model with a soft light. Baartman and the Bangwa figure are, in these instances, sexualized as a general trope of the “African female”. Grossman’s statement above merely uses the photograph of the figure as an example of how “African objects”, in the plural, were interpreted and became sexualized and racialized at the time. In this sense, they are not unique but examples of stereotyping.

On a non-sexualized—or at least less sexualized—note, Baartman was viewed as a prime example of all Khoisan women just as the Bangwa figure is often the iconic representation for all Cameroonian art. Baartman was referred to as the “Hottentot Venus” making her practically

nameless to European audiences. She was stripped of individuality, making it convenient to equate her to the European stereotypes of “Hottentot” (Khoisan) women. Her stage props and costume made her even more of a stereotype. The costume made her look as nude as possible to draw attention to her large buttocks, and she held a pipe onstage to adhere to the myth that Khoisan women smoked excessively (Holmes 2007). The Bangwa figure, conversely, is not typically forced into stereotypes. She is, however, often utilized as the token example of Cameroonian art. She is on the cover of *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* by Wendy Grossman (2009); *The Art of Cameroon* by Tamara Northern (1984); *Expressions of Cameroon Art* (1986) also by Northern; and *Cameroon Art and Kings* edited by Lorenz Hombberger (2008). Her covergirl status makes her recognizable as the public face of Cameroonian art.

Paradoxically, the Bangwa figure is also revered for her uniqueness. For as often as she is used as an overarching example of Cameroonian art, it is interesting to note that collector and African art scholar Jean-Baptiste Bacquart calls attention to her “dynamic pose which is uncharacteristically African” (Bacquart 1998:110). How can she be the iconic example of Cameroonian art while being *uncharacteristically African*? Could she have first been admired in the West specifically because of these so-called “uncharacteristically African” qualities? African objects were first being regarded as art in the early twentieth century when the Bangwa figure appeared in the exhibition *African Negro Art* (1935) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and her “uncharacteristically African” qualities may have made her more likable to Western audiences that were not acclimated to seeing African art.

At the same time that the figure was regarded as a general example of Cameroon art, she was also admired for her one-of-a-kind qualities. Arguably, all Bangwa art is unique from its

counterparts, as it is difficult to classify a distinct Bangwa style (Brain and Pollock 1971:26). However, because all Bangwa art is diverse, it is difficult to accept that the “Queen” figure is adored to such an extent solely for her uniqueness. What makes the Bangwa “Queen” figure so notable is the superlative qualities of her uniqueness. African art historian William Fagg in reference to the Bangwa figure stated that she “bids fair to be the *finest* example of movement in all African sculpture” (Northern 1986:20, emphasis added). To Fagg, she is not only unique; she is the best at being unique. Instances that will be discussed in the second chapter, such as her record breaking sale price in 1990 to the Musée Dapper, are factual superlatives that cannot be debated and that add to her exceptionality.

Using superlatives to highlight uniqueness is correspondingly apparent in the career of Saartjie Baartman. As a marketing technique, Baartman’s managers “focused on accentuating her difference”, which meant accentuating her buttocks, said to be “unequaled by any to be seen in London” (Holmes 2007:42-43). Her fame partly relied on her uniqueness from European anatomy. She was advertised almost as a freak of nature (Crais and Scully 2009:112) and as the extreme Hottentot stereotype.

The fame of the “Hottentot Venus” was quite obviously relied on her paradoxical embodiment of being both a stereotype and a particularity. As seen above, this contradiction is observable in the study of the Bangwa figure. However, to extrapolate that it is essential to the success of the figure in the same way that it was for Baartman borders on being too presumptuous. Of course there are multiple factors, some of which are highlighted above, that contribute to the reputation of the Bangwa figure. Is the duality of being an archetype and being one-of-a-kind a factor in the figure’s fame or a result of it?

This notion that the Bangwa figure is famous is worth examining in terms of Baartman's fame. How does the figure's "celebrityhood" differ from Baartman's? Who considers the figure to be famous and why? Baartman and the Bangwa figure both had publicly visible interactions important or famous people. Both were put in the spotlight in various ways at different points in time.

To begin with Baartman, her public image was influenced by a prominent 1810 court case. The famed abolitionist Zachary Macaulay considered the treatment of Baartman and her long working hours under unfavorable conditions to be comparable to slave-status labor. He therefore waged a court case against her managers. Macaulay caused the press to go crazy, making Baartman even more of a household name than she already was from her performances alone (Holmes 2007:51-60). The case gave Baartman more publicity and perhaps caused some to question how she was treated as an object. The Bangwa figure has not had quite as controversial of a past as Baartman. While a critic may denounce the display of an exhibition, I have not found any direct critiques of how the Bangwa figure in particular is displayed. This is a significant difference between Baartman and the Bangwa figure in how their Western celebrityhood is framed.

The Bangwa figure, in contrast to Baartman, has been celebrated for her provenance in the West. She been in collections of extremely influential collectors, perhaps not as much at the beginning of her tenure in the West as was the case after the turn of the twentieth century. These important collectors in the African art trade, such as Charles Ratton, Helena Rubinstein, and Henry A. Franklin, helped promote the fame of the Bangwa "Queen" with their own fame. As Valerie Franklin, daughter of Henry A. Franklin, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990: "We have

always kept the collection in the public eye.” Notably, that public eye has included the likes of John Huston, Dinah Shore, Edward G. Robinson, Frank Sinatra, Neil Simon, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Jacques Lipchitz, Paul Newman, Sherry Langsing, and Bill Cosby who are said to have “frequented” the Franklin Gallery (Reif 1990). The fame of these people helps to affirm the validity of the Franklin Gallery. Famous people can afford luxury and therefore are viewed as having the highest quality of goods. If they are visiting the Franklin Gallery, then this gallery could be viewed by art circles as a high quality establishment that houses some of the most superior artworks. I explore the Bangwa figure’s role in these collections in the second chapter.

Aside from private collections, the Bangwa figure also functions with a certain notion of fame in the museum setting. The museum itself plays a role in this idea of fame, and Baartman’s case helps to frame this question. Her associations with Paris’ Museum of Natural History put her name next to that of one of the most respected museums in France. Likewise, the Bangwa figure has undoubtedly appeared in well known institutions—the MoMA, Metropolitan Museum of Art, etc.—which raises questions of how an artwork becomes a masterpiece. Is the masterpiece status attributed to the piece as soon as the artist completes it, or is it a status that a piece acquires over time because of the influence of museums, curators, and art historians? The Bangwa figure becomes better known with each museum she visits. In 1935, she appeared in *African Negro Art*, the first show of African art hosted by the MoMA. This exhibition effectively proclaimed the figure as one of the 603 most prominent works of African art and as one of the 35 most prominent works of Cameroonian art (Sweeney 1935). Two decades later, she was chosen as one of the works to represent Cameroon in “500 years of Negro African art” in the Brooklyn Museum’s 1954 exhibition *Masterpieces of African Art*. The figure was exhibited later in the

Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met Museum), and the Musée Dapper in Paris. Unlike Baartman, the Bangwa figure has been exhibited through many decades and is a component of historical changes in curatorial approaches. Reasons for the Bangwa figure's celebrityhood is continually being re-contextualized within the institution of the museum.

Saartjie Baartman's rise to fame provides an interesting framework for understanding how the Bangwa "Queen" figure achieved her notoriety. Baartman's story informs the case of the Bangwa figure through parallels that—while not seamless mirror images of each other—raise a series of questions about the Bangwa figure. Comparing Baartman's famous career to the beginning of the Bangwa figure's life in the West offers one way to understand the missing information in the figure's history. For example, Baartman was very explicitly displayed as a sexual object, but we have seen how the figure's display as a sexual object is not always as obvious. This study benefits not only by looking at the similarities between Baartman's story and the Bangwa figure's but also by examining the differences.

While the two African females, Baartman and the Bangwa figure, began their Western careers during European colonization in Africa, a couple of key distinctions must be made clear. First, Baartman was a living human being who could react. That reaction reared its ugly head through Baartman's overuse of alcohol, which eventually contributed to her death (Holmes 2007:92-93). The Bangwa figure, while not completely inanimate (LaGamma 2011:125), is unable to physically react to her conditions. That is not to say that the figure's display is comparable to the horrendous display of Baartman or even that displaying the figure is a negative action. Rather, I highlight this difference as to not belittle the suffering that Baartman endured. Moreover, Baartman began her European tour in 1810 and died five years later. The

Bangwa “Queen” started her tenure in the West almost ninety years later in 1897-98 and continues it now, over one hundred and fifteen years later. Therefore, the Bangwa figure has seen the end of colonialism and a drastic change in Western approaches to the fields of African anthropology, ethnography and art history. Finally, the type of display differs between Baartman and the figure. Baartman’s recurring performance always counted on her skin-tight costume, stereotyped accessories, and musical component. These factors led to her interpretation as an “extraordinary phenomenon of nature” (Holmes 2007:7), a euphemism for freak of nature. Conversely, the Bangwa figure is constantly being re-imagined in each exhibition. She is a *chef d’oeuvre* in the Brooklyn Museum’s 1954-55 exhibition *Masterpieces of African Art*; admired for her gender in *Femmes dans les arts d’Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] of the Musée Dapper in 2008; and crowned a heroine in the Met Museum’s *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* in 2011, to name a few. Therefore, the way in which Baartman’s career is understood in relation to the Bangwa figure’s must be considered cautiously. The comparison cannot be taken literally but presents a jumping-off point for analyzing the figure in this study.

Baartman’s story reveals objectification, sexualization, stereotyping, and celebrityhood in their extreme forms, traits that would not necessarily be associated with a sculpture such as the Bangwa figure. By framing this study in terms of Saartjie Baartman, it becomes clear that these human traits have followed the Bangwa figure in her Western life as well. They appear as side effects of institutionalized racism in her early career but, as time moves on, make their presence known as *faux pas* to be avoided. Because it is impossible for the Bangwa figure to speak for herself on such matters, this study will examine the figure’s surroundings through time.

The remainder of this study aims to answer the overarching question: How does the Bangwa “Queen” figure function within an anthropological understanding of how the West perceives the “other” in the context of iconographic African art? How is the meaning of the Bangwa figure imagined, re-imagined, constructed, and appropriated? To do so, I explore various contexts in which the figure has appeared and resided and address major events in the figure’s Western history spanning over a century.

The first chapter provides a background of the figure in her original context. I examine what is known about her life in the Cameron Grassfields and how not knowing everything about her original context has impacted how she is interpreted in the West. The second chapter traces her history through Western museums and private collections. Personal recollections from Valerie Franklin, the daughter of Harry A. Franklin, help in the understanding of the Bangwa figure’s life among a private collector. I consider the larger exhibitions in which the figure appeared to inquire how museums shape stories and histories of the figure and of African culture in general. I begin with the 1935 MoMA exhibition and end with the 2011 Met Museum exhibition. Here, I analyze how meaning is construed. In the third chapter, I address the question of appropriation. I look at how images of the figure have been utilized in non-museum contexts, such as photography. By examining exhibition photographs and professional photographs of the figure by Man Ray and Walker Evans, I continue the discussion on the boundaries of meaning making. Besides photography, this chapter also explores film, painting, and literary appropriations.

The Bangwa “Queen” figure in particular is the focus of this project because her history in the West exemplifies the ways meaning is imagined, re-imagined, constructed, and

appropriated for a particular object. While there have been academic texts and discourses on museum and collecting practices of non-Western objects since the 1980s, often only brief examples are given of the actual implications of these practices. This study of the Bangwa figure attempts to address this discourse with concrete evidence of meaning-making in Western museums, collections, representations, and appropriations. I chose the Bangwa “Queen” figure over other objects of African art because of the many superlatives assigned to her (Fagg in Northern 1986:20), because of her high auction prices that have garnered media attention, and because of the various ways in which her image has been reproduced outside of displaying the figure herself.

My methodology consists of interviews, exhibition observations, reviews of documents and audiovisual materials, and visual analysis of photographs and objects. I received approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bard College and communicated this information to all interviewees. The interviewees in this study are collectors, professionals in museums or galleries, or academics in the field of African art. Throughout the text, I draw heavily on the writing of curators Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke (*Representing Africa in American Art Museums*, 2010), of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff (*The Social Life of Things*, 1986), and of anthropologist James Clifford (*The Predicament of Culture*, 1988). I also consider the six years of conferences on the state of museum that cumulated in the books *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) and *Museum Frictions* (2006) edited by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Thomás Ybarra, Frausto, respectively. Berzock and Clarke provide a comprehensive history of African art in art museums across the United States that is useful to contextualize the Bangwa figure in relation to other works of African art brought to the West

from the early twentieth century to the present day. Appadurai and Kopytoff consider “things” to have life histories and careers, and I borrow this approach in this study of the Bangwa figure. Clifford and Karp both critique the display of non-Western art in museums, from converging and diverging viewpoints. For example, Clifford supplies an anthropological perspective for this study through his intensive analysis of Western anthropology’s interactions with visual culture. He notes that categories of the beautiful, cultural, and authentic are malleable and therefore impact systems of art and anthropology (1988:229). His viewpoints look at the collection and display of non-Western objects in terms of how this occurs within Western culture, an approach that I maintain during this study. Svetlana Alpers challenges Clifford in Karp’s *Exhibiting Cultures* by asserting that the anthropological texts that Clifford praises would have different connotations in a museum setting that Clifford does not address (1991:30). She states that museums turn material culture into art objects, a Western self-satisfying practice: “It is to ourselves, then, that we are representing things in museums” (1991:32). Alpers point must be acknowledged. Notably, both Clifford and Alpers recognize that non-Western objects operate within Western modes of understanding in terms of what “art” is and expectations of how to interact with said “art”.

Limitations to this study mainly deal with accessibility. For example, another limitation that I encountered was not being able to see the figure herself because she is currently in storage in Switzerland. I used this limitation to my advantage in order to analyze Western representations of the Bangwa figure, as is the aim of this study, rather than to analyze the figure herself. I did, however, see the figure in person in 2011 at an exhibition at the Met Museum, two years before the start of this study. Lack of documentation is another accessibility limitation that I

encountered. There is not much documented about the original context of the Bangwa figure, to whom she belonged, and who she represents. Additionally, many institutions that I contacted had little to no documentation of receiving a portfolio of photographs by Walker Evans in the 1930s that included a photograph of the Bangwa figure. To minimize this limitation, I use the lack of documentation as another means of analyzing the Bangwa figure's meaning in the West. How does the *non-dit* or the not recorded add to Western interpretations of the figure?

Ideally the history of its own collection and display should be a visible aspect of any exhibition.
[Clifford 1988:229]

1. Contextualizing the Bangwa Figure

The Bangwa area of the present-day Cameroonian Grassfields is located on the western edge of the Bamileke region, on the border with the Bamum region. The Bamileke and Bamum regions are named after the Bamileke and Bamum kingdoms who lived there during the German colonial period (Brain 1972:9). However, it is slightly misleading to refer to Bangwa as one of the Bamileke chiefdoms. Doing so suggests that the Bangwa have similar cultural features to all other Bamileke chiefdoms and distinct cultural features from all Bamum chiefdoms. While the Bangwa do have some particular artistic styles that are similar—and different—to those of other Bamileke chiefdoms,⁴ it is important to note that the grouping of Bamileke chiefdoms together is not a grouping that the Bamileke themselves invented. While some similar artistic styles exist between different Bamileke chiefdoms due to cultural exchange between neighboring peoples, it does not necessarily denote that they are all of the same ethnic group. In fact, Bamileke is neither the name of an ethnic group nor a political group. French and British colonial administrations fabricated the grouping of chiefdoms when they divided the areas between themselves in order to easily classify the region. In reality the Bamileke and Bangwa groupings only refer to geographic areas (Homberger, Geary, and Koloss 2008:17; Brain 1972:9).

⁴ In looking specifically at artistic practices, the 19th century Bangwa shared some stylistic similarities with neighboring kingdoms, both those who lived in the low-lying areas and mountainous areas. Defining a particular Bangwa style is thus difficult because inspiration was drawn from diverse sources. In the 1970s, anthropologist Robert Brain identified two artistic styles—the Bamileke style and the Cross River style—which shared stylistic tropes with some Bangwa pieces. Brain also notes that those in the Bangwa region at the time of his research (1970s), could not confidently identify an old piece as being made by the Bangwa because of this melange of styles (Brain and Pollock 1978:14-28).

Missing Histories

There is no real written history of the region before the Germans arrived in the nineteenth century. As Foantem Lefang, the Fon (King) of the largest Bangwa city, Fontem, put it in 1963:

“Before the time the Europeans came Bangwa people could not reckon years as they do now. One did not know how many years he lived before dying. One does not know how many years we stayed [in the Fontem region] until the day the Germans came. But we do know that no Fon before Foantem Asunganyi saw the Germans. Foantem Asunganyi is the one who saw the Germans.” [Dunstan 1965:408]

Foantem Lefang’s account shows what is unknown about the Bangwa region, but what is known is that the Portuguese traded along the Cameroonian coast as early as the fifteenth century until slavery was outlawed four centuries later (Ferretti 1975:11). Bantu people migrated from the Upper Nile to the Grassfields region in the fifteenth century as well. Fred Ferretti, an American journalist-turned-author of *Afo-A-Kom: Sacred Art of Cameroon*, notes that these people eventually came to be known as the Bamileke (1975:11). However, Ferretti’s account is problematic because it portrays the Bamileke as a single Bantu ethnicity. While Bantu peoples do make up part of the Bamileke region, the nature of oral history makes it difficult to discount the possibility of other ethnicities also having migrated to the area. Regardless, the Bamileke region’s pre-colonial history is murky at best.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Germans were sending missionaries and colonizers to the area. In 1897 the German colonial agent Gustav Conrau made his first trip to Bangwa, a sub-division of the Bamileke region made up of nine smaller chiefdoms (Hombberger, Geary, and Koloss 2008:18). The Portuguese traded mostly along the coast, making Conrau the first European to ever pass through the Bangwa mountains (Brain and Pollock 1971:1). Conrau was recruiting Bangwa men to work on German plantations on the Cameroonian coast and was

also collecting objects of ethnographic interest for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (Northern 1986:20; Brain 1977:99). I specify that Conrau collected ethnographic objects because the West did not recognize African pieces as art until much later. Until the second half of the

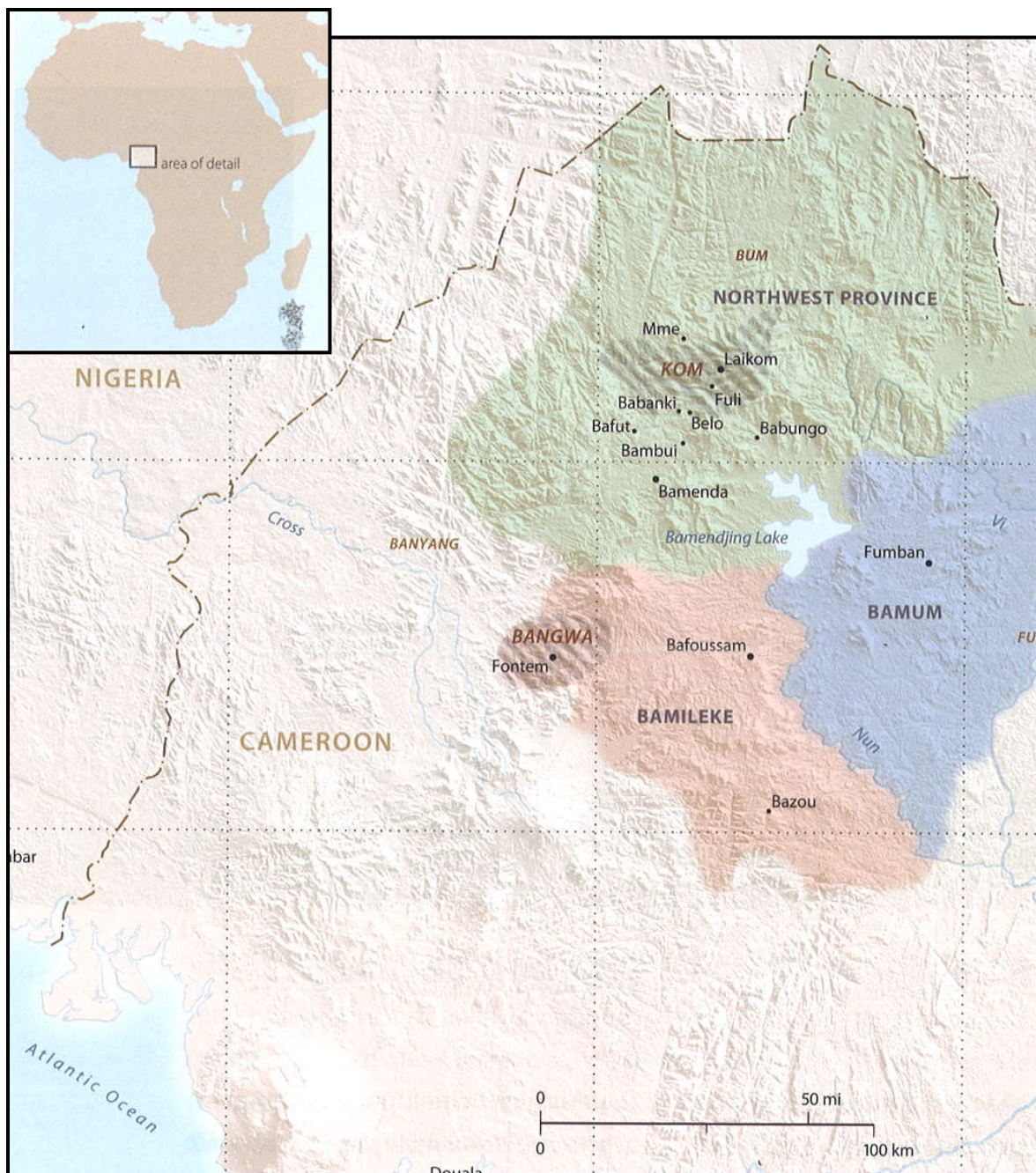


Fig. 3. Map of the Grassfields region of Cameroon. Modified from: *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Alisa LaGamma, 2011. Figure 109.

twentieth century, European museums mostly treated African art as artifact. American museums labeled African art as “primitive art” through the 1990s, which implies that it is lesser than Western-made “high art” (Berzock and Clarke 2011:5-6).⁵ Therefore, art pieces that Conrau collected in the nineteenth century have changed meaning multiple times since entering the Museum für Völkerkunde, from ethnographic object of science to work of art. The esteemed Bangwa “Queen” figure was among these objects that Conrau brought to Germany from the Grassfields in 1897-98 (Fig. 4).

The Bangwa “Queen”: a *Lefem* Figure

Mouth open in song and knees bent in dance, the Bangwa “Queen” figure evokes movement even in her sculptural state. In her right hand she grasps a ceremonial basketry rattle. Necklaces, bracelets, and anklets adorn her otherwise unclothed body. This jewelry, along with traces of red camwood powder, signify the prestige she held among the Bangwa (Northern 1986:18). Her weight rests on the tips of her toes and her shoulders lean slightly forward to show that she does not pose but instead dances; the sculpture is a snapshot of a woman in motion. She represents the mother of twins or of a special child and is a priestess of the earth (Brain and Pollock 1971:123; Northern 1986:20). Being a priestess of the earth, she would have performed the dance of the earth. The carver captured her in this moment of dance, indicated by her stance

⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art continued to group non-Western works together under the Department of Primitive Art until the 1980s. I gained this information from a personal conversation with Carol Thompson, Curator of African Art at the High Museum in Atlanta in 2012. She had interned with the ‘Department of Primitive Art’ in the 1980s and was chided for questioning the name of the department. The Met, not surprisingly, does not advertise the fact that they used the term *primitive* in such recent history. The Met does still group most non-Western art together (with the exception of Asian, Egyptian, and Muslim art) under the same department, but it is now referred to as the “arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas”. This department was established in part through a bequest from Nelson A. Rockefeller, and therefore it would presumably be difficult to break into separate departments.

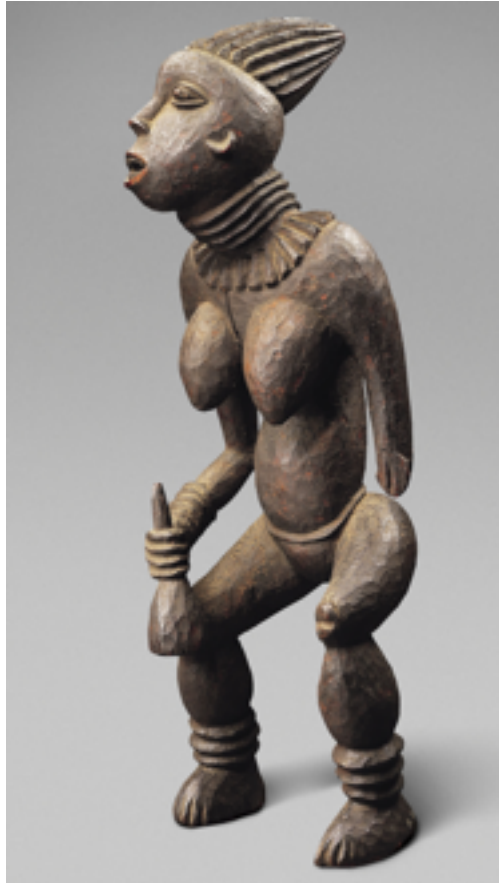


Fig. 4. Female *lefem* figure, Bangwa, Grassfields region, Cameroon. Late 19th century, Wood, pigments, H. 85 cm. Musée Dapper. Paris. From: *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Alisa LaGamma, 2011. Figure 113.

and by the basketry rattle. This information is deduced from Conrau's notes when he acquired her which stated that she was called *njuindem/ngwindem*, meaning woman of god (Northern 1986:20). She represents a particular ancestress, a woman who was once a live human being but whose identity is unknown today.

This figure belongs to the category of statuettes known as *lefem* figures, portraits of important ancestors. Like Bangwa history, not much is known about *lefem* figures. The most recent *lefem* statue representing the parent of twins or a special child was found in Bangwa in 1967, and only one was found. It seems that the practice of carving *lefem* figures no longer takes place in the Bangwa region. Remember that Conrau brought the Bangwa "Queen" to Germany

seven decades earlier (Brain and Pollock 1971:123). Some academics are self-aware of this lack of information, including Robert Brain and Tamara Northern. Brain states that it was “very difficult to unearth any reliable information about [*lefem* figures]” (1971:123), while Northern points out the time that passed between Conrau’s collecting and her study. She notes: “We know only pieces of the mosaic and attempt to join them meaningfully” (1986:20; 1984:84). To take Northern’s advice, we can join the fragments of what is known about women in Bangwa society and about *lefem* figures in general to contextualize the figure within her intended function.

Women were highly regarded in Bangwa society, in part because of their reproductive abilities. A kingdom becomes bigger and therefore more powerful with the more people the king governs. So women who birthed twins were effectively increasing the size of the kingdom by two. Women were also respected enough that the Fon (king) often approached the queen mother or his favorite wife for advice (Northern 1984:31). While women were often considered to have a lower social status than men, they had more control over land than men and could even take a pseudo-chief role in some specific circumstances in paramount chiefdoms (Brain 1972:153). Therefore, we can conclude that the woman represented in this statue was very highly respected while she was living, especially because female ancestors are worshiped for their own sake, not propitiated through fear (Brain 1972:57).

Lefem figures, both male and female, took on a variety of roles even in Bangwa society. Among these roles are: members of the aegis of the palace and the regulatory society; displays of wealth; shows of the Fon’s (king’s) vitality; historical records of the kingdom; and affirmations of the kingdom’s continuation and, by extension, affirmation of the Fon’s power (Northern 1984:31). What these figures actually are in terms of their essence of being is a bit more

complicated. While they are not considered to be human, they are a part of the “human social world” because they are tangible objects that interact with human beings. Therefore, they are not part the spiritual realm (Northern 1984:38). While they are not considered to be spirits, they are “temporary abodes of spirits” during certain rituals (Brain and Pollock 1971:57). They were brought out of shelter for a ritual at the end of the dry season to make the earth fertile again and at other annual ceremonies that dealt with the earth and nature’s forms such as lakes, waterfalls, rocks, mountains, or trees (Harter 1990). At once, *lefem* figures both belong and do not belong to either the human or spiritual categories. They are more than representations of real people but are not the actual spirits of ancestors. Therefore I use the terminology “embodiments of real people” because they reify the essence of the ancestors and their spirits. Again, the identity of the individual represented in statue in this study is unfortunately unknown.

Her unknown identity manifests itself in confusion over how to properly name her, which was discussed in the introduction. Consequently, she has been called a variety of names: Bangwa Queen, Dancing Figure, *Lefem* Figure, *Njuindem* (Woman of God), Bangwa Priestess, Ancestress, or any mixture of the aforementioned titles are all commonplace (Pleasants 1954; Cotter 2011; Vogel 1981:184; LaGamma 2011:127). While many of these names are accurate descriptions, one of the most common—The Bangwa Queen—is not. Academics who have written about the figure are aware of this inaccuracy. The solution for many, such as scholar and curator Wendy Grossman, writer Holland Cotter of the *New York Times*, and writer Suzanne Muchnic of the *Los Angeles Times* is to add quotation marks. These quotes acknowledge that Bangwa “Queen” may not be the best suited title, yet it preserves the connotation of royalty that it provides. While the figure is famous in the realm of African art, those outside of the field may

not be aware of its glamorous past. Therefore, referring to the figure as the Bangwa “Queen” with the quotation marks dually upholds a prestigious connotation and points out the deception of the title.

Becoming Iconic

The description that accompanies whichever name she is given in many art historical publications draws attention to the dynamic nature of the figure, along with the uncommonly rough finish of the wood and the asymmetric design (Bassani 2005:367; Grossman, Bari, and Bonnell 2009:20; LaGamma 2011:127). This suggests that these are the qualities that make her among the most prized pieces of iconographic African art. African art historian William Fagg, in reference to the figure, supports this analysis: “This celebrated figure of a dancing woman bids fair to be the finest expression of movement in all African sculpture” (Nothorn 1986:20).

Fagg’s qualifier “celebrated” hardly indicates how famous the figure has become among African art enthusiasts. However, the fame of the Bangwa figure in the West is not solely—or arguably even primarily—due to her formal physical qualities. Perhaps Wendy Grossman puts it best:

The sculpture’s fame and prestige is confirmed not only by its provenance—from Berlin’s Museum für Volkerkunde and Ratton’s Paris Gallery to the Rubinstein collection—but also by the fact that two of the twentieth century’s most influential photographers [Man Ray and Walker Evans] were commissioned at different times to document it. [Grossman, Bari, and Bonnell 2009:19]

Note that Grossman does not attribute the figure’s fame—and therefore her value—to her uniqueness, her physical artistic qualities, nor her role in Bangwa society. Instead, she mentions where the figure has been outside of Cameroon. The reader is expected to know, or at least

understand from context clues, that the Museum für Volkerkunde, Charles Ratton's gallery, and Helena Rubinstein's collection are key names in the history of African art collecting. This is not a critique of Grossman but rather an observation of how the figure is perceived in regards to where the notion of fame comes from. It promotes and favors one particular history—meaning the figure's history in the West—over another—meaning her original context. Central to this study is a comprehension of how the figure has assumed a high status in the West.

The names that Grossman mentions are indeed important in the world of African art. Ratton was one of the great Parisian art dealers of the 1930s and was a key figure in shifting the perception of African pieces from artifact to art, a process in which the Bangwa figure played a role (Dagen and Murphy 2013:9-12). Rubinstein was a cosmetics mogul and prominent collector of African art. Her socialite status drew attention to her African art and Modernist art collecting practices. While she owned the Bangwa figure, the Modernist artist Man Ray photographed it, thus connecting the figure to the Modernist movement. Around the same time, the figure appeared in the 1935 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *African Negro Art*, which included photographs of the figure by famed American photographer Walker Evans. The Bangwa figure was also once in the collection of Harry A. Franklin, known for his prestigious collection of African art and for his gallery in Beverly Hills (Muchnic 2013). More recently, the figure was showcased in the 2011 Met Museum exhibition *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. The following chapters detail this history from Ratton to the present day. Overall, she is one of the most famous iconographic sculptures in all of African art.

Her iconic status can also be seen in the number of art historical texts in which her photograph appears. She begins and ends Wendy Grossman's *Man Ray, African Art, and the*

Modernist Lens. Both images—on the front and back covers—are photographs by famed Modernist photographer Man Ray, who is also the focus of the book. The photograph on the front cover fills the page. The figure defines the length of the page, but the width encompasses mostly black space and shadows. Man Ray situated his lens above the figure which, along with the angle of the figure’s neck, makes it as though she (the figure) is looking up at us. We gaze down on her ever so slightly, without explicitly noticing either the physical nor metaphorical significance of our viewpoint. The text of the book itself is sandwiched between this photograph and a smaller one on the back cover. The photograph on the back cover, in an almost pun-like expression, is a view of the back of the figure. In this way, the Bangwa “Queen” encompasses the entirety of the book: she is Man Ray *and* African Art *and* the Modernist Lens. Despite the current prestige of the figure, it was and is not Man Ray’s most well known photograph of an African sculpture. His photograph with a Baule-style mask entitled *Noire et blanche* [Black and White] is much more well known (Fig. 12). Why then was the Bangwa figure chosen as the book’s cover and not the Baule-style mask? It could be to show the extent of Man Ray’s interaction with African objects beyond one renowned photograph. Or it could be that the Bangwa figure, for Grossman, best represents African art through the “Modernist lens”. The figure is therefore associated with the Western art movement of Modernism.

Of course, the Bangwa figure has been made to represent more than just the “Modernist lens” in recent history. Besides covering Grossman’s publication, she is also the covergirl for Tamara Northern’s *The Art of Cameroon* and *Expressions of Cameroon Art*. A close-up of her face against a soft brown background covers *Cameroon Art and Kings* edited by Lorenz Homberger. With more covers than an A-List celebrity, I have to wonder: What is next, *Paris*

magazine? Actually, that one is already checked off of the list. Although she did not cover the magazine, Man Ray's photograph of the figure with a nude female model accompanied a 1935 article titled *Une Nuit de Singapour* [One Night in Singapore] wherein she was made to represent male fantasies of exotic women (Grossman, Bari, and Bonnell 2009:136).

In recent history, the figure has been interpreted through a sexualized lens. Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter's review of the Musée Dapper's 2008 show *Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] carries a tone of sexualizing exotic women. Geoffroy-Schneiter credits the figure's overwhelming presence to her "flexed" legs and "chest punctuated with a pair of vigorous breasts." Despite her "vigorous breasts," Geoffroy-Schneiter goes on to state: "There is no...alluring sensuality characterized here." Why mention her breasts at all if not for alluring sensuality? In 2011, the figure appeared in Alisa LaGamma's exhibition at the Met Museum entitled *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* where she took on the sexualized role of "Wonder Woman" according to the *New York Times*. The main image for Holland Cotter's September 22, 2011 review of *Heroic Africans* in the *New York Times* is an exhibition photograph of the figure with the caption: "The 'Bangwa Queen' from the Grassfields region of Cameroon, originally in a nineteenth century shrine, is a *centerpiece* of the Met's 'Heroic Africans' exhibition" (emphasis added). Like a centerpiece of flowers at a dinner party, the figure sits at the center of the grandiose gathering, inviting guests to gawk for a second and then move on to their own preoccupations. She functions as an object of beauty and as a conversation starter.

And for Cotter, she definitely sparked the conversation. He calls her a "superheroine" and "the show's Wonder Woman," giving her an unmistakable sexual mystique. Just as Wonder

Woman was the Justice League's token female, Cotter makes the Bangwa figure stand as a symbol of what an African heroine should be: famous, beautiful, and full of personality. In fact, Cotter boasts about the figure's "explosive, ecstatic" personality. The wooden sculpture becomes human—or more accurately, becomes superhuman—with raging emotions. It seems that Cotter abides by an outdated stereotype that no female, not even a female sculpture, and not even a superheroine, can contain her emotions. Just like the Wonder Woman of DC Comics, the Bangwa figure is supposed to fight for sexual equality in the exhibition, proving that females belong in the "Heroic Africans" category. However, both Wonder Woman and the Bangwa figure become sexually exploited in the process. They are both non-living objects that have become personified only in order to allow them to be objectified again in the end. They are stripped of a real identity and are turned into symbolic tropes of what a strong woman should be.

However, it is not clear that LaGamma intended for the Bangwa figure to be interpreted in this sexualized way. She notes that Man Ray's 1934 photographs of the figure with a nude female model "demonstrat[ed] the European avant-garde's conflation of African art with exoticism and charged sexuality" (LaGamma 2011:127). LaGamma mentions Man Ray's photographs as part of the object's history, implying that equating African art to exotic sexuality—such as the exotic sexuality of the Amazonian Wonder Woman—is a thing of the past. LaGamma never explicitly states how she intends the viewer to interpret the figure. Rather, she provides a historical chronology of the figure. Despite LaGamma's intentions, it is difficult to shake the feeling that Cotter's sexualized write-up of the Bangwa figure is reminiscent of the story of Saartjie Baartman.

I began this chapter about the history of the Bangwa figure with a statement from James Clifford: “Ideally the history of its own collection and display should be a visible aspect of any exhibition” (1988:229). My approach for this chapter, and the remainder of this study, maintains that not only should the history of the Bangwa figure’s collection and display be visible, but that this history should also be analyzed. What contexts, both past and present, allow for the display of the Bangwa figure as African art in a Western museum? The facts of her past—where she was carved, why, and what function she served in her original context—are interpreted in conjunction with facts that are missing. When facts are missing, they are often filled in with conjecture. For example, a greater understanding of her original function is possible by combining what is known about *lefem* figures with what is known about women in Bangwa society. What is known and interpreted about her original context by Western academics and medias early on in her Western tenure allowed her to play a role in how African art was portrayed. She became associated with the Modernist movement—an association that is still relevant judging by exhibitions such as *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* (2011) and *Charles Ratton, l’invention des arts “primitifs”* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of “Primitive” Art] (2013). The Bangwa figure was also associated with sexualized exoticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, despite intentions of curators, still carries that connotation in Western media. The gap between intention and reality is relevant to this study in that it shows how the Bangwa figure can hold multiple meanings and functions at the same time. While this chapter focuses on contextualizing the Bangwa figure within her history of collection and display from her conception to her time in the West, the following chapter delves deeper into the implications that accompany her collection and display outside of the Cameroon Grassfields.

If we regard some commodities as having 'life histories' or 'careers' in a meaningful sense, then it becomes useful to look at the distribution of knowledge at various points in their careers.
[Appadurai 1988:41]

2. Constructing Meaning Through Museums & Collections

The buying and selling of the Bangwa figure has made her, in some sense, a commodity.⁶ It is unclear and unlikely that her commoditization began before her interaction with Gustav Conrau in 1897-98. Therefore for accuracy's sake, I center my study of her "life history" and "career" of commoditization around her time spent in the West (1898-present). The statement above, taken from the introduction of *The Social Life of Things* (1988) by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai frames how this chapter approaches the Bangwa figure's "life history". I examine various points in her career in Western museums and collections in relation to her portrayed and interpreted meanings. The overarching term "meaning" used here refers to social, cultural, and historical associations and definitions ascribed to the figure. While "meaning" generally alludes to *intended* (and actual) signification, I do not exclude *unintended* meaning that museum audiences may draw from a display. Interestingly, there are layers of meaning that constantly surround the Bangwa figure such as: her significance among the Bangwa peoples of the nineteenth century; her significance as an object of art in a Western museum or collection; and her significance as an object being displayed in a particular exhibition with a specific theme.

⁶ I draw on the definition of commodity provided by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in the introduction of his book *The Social Life of Things* (1988). Appadurai argues the social aspects of commodities through a Marxian lens. In discussing art collections of non-Western objects that are now in the Western world, he notes that the "critical cultural issues" surrounding these objects deal with authenticity and singularity, both of which are highly relevant to the study of the Bangwa figure. Appadurai goes on to discuss the multiple "diversions" that these objects encounter and that through such diversions they are "transferred by a variety of modes that make their history of claims and counterclaims extremely difficult to adjudicate" (1988:27). This study is concerned with these claims and counterclaims that make up the history of the Bangwa figure in the West. I do not attempt to adjudicate this history, so to say, but I rather use the history to explore the questions raised in the introductory chapter of this project.

The Bangwa figure has been in a plethora of museums in the West since leaving Cameroon. Through such, her meaning has been re-constructed and reimagined with each new display. A certain trend in the evolution of African arts exhibitions starts to appear by following her history of display. This trend of display begins with survey exhibitions in which objects are included based primarily on their geographic origins in Africa. As time elapses, the exhibitions become more and more specialized around themes that draw on specific qualities of the Bangwa figure in order to justify her belonging in the exhibition. This evolution outlined above is evident first and foremost in the exhibition titles: *African Negro Art* (1935), *Masterpieces of African Art* (1954-55), *African Sculpture* (1970), and *The Art of Cameroon* (1984) which specifically limit the exhibition focus geographically.

The specialization of exhibitions becomes more prominent at the turn of the century, evident in the titles of exhibitions that feature the Bangwa figure. With *Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] (2008) and *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* (2011), the titles imply a stronger concentration on qualitative nuances over geographic origins. This is important because in these later exhibitions the Bangwa figure is grouped with other objects for various (non-geographical) reasons that are contingent on their shared characteristics or imagined stories. Therefore, the exhibition provides alternative angles for exploring her meaning. It reconsiders cultural factors of her original function and asks questions—such as the role of women in Bangwa society in the case of *Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa]—that may not have been asked previously. It also provides insight into Western ideas and notions of the museum. What is the role and authority of

museums in Western society that they are able to ask such questions?⁷ What knowledge is meant to be relayed by them?

This chapter looks at this evolving trend that has imagined and reimagined the Bangwa figure's perceived artistic and pedagogical values through her life history in Europe and the United States. While much attention is given to museum exhibitions, I draw from other sources of "display" as well, such as media portrayals and private displays by individual collectors. At the center of this chapter is how the Bangwa figure is displayed to—or hidden from—the public, through exhibitions, newspaper articles, and private collections. In each of these locales, she has played varying roles, from a purely visual role to an over-arching representative role of the Bangwa peoples to a role of fame and of valued monetary investment. These variations come from spacial, conceptual, and temporal differences between different displays. The idea of an evolving trend means that each point is dependent on its preceding point because the field of African art history has evolved as a whole. Nothing can be divorced from its respective historical context.⁸ It is therefore useful to organize this study chronologically. Please refer to the timeline for her overarching history of ownership and display (Pp. 1).

⁷ Ivan Karp explains that the authority of the museum comes from the display of objects itself: "The consequences of putting objects into even the Spartan context of the art gallery makes the museum effect into an apparatus of power," and later, "Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication" (Karp and Lavine 1991:14-15).

⁸ African art history was not considered its own discipline until 1957 (Berzock and Clarke 2010:10). Thus, each display before 1957 had to either address or prove that African art was/is indeed art. After that notion was widely accepted, displays still had to prove that African art was/is distinct from other "tribal" or "primitive" arts, i.e. other non-Western arts. Therefore it should not be surprising that (1) exhibitions up to the 1970s focused on Africa as a whole, trying to affirm the two aforementioned points and that (2) exhibitions after this time were able to employ more specific or specialized themes.

Early History: 1897 to the 1930s

There is not much detailed documentation on the Bangwa figure in the West before the 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the MoMA. In fact, the Museum Für Völkerkunde, Berlin does not have documentation of her before a 1926 a record of her deaccession from the museum (Fig. 5). At this time, the Berlin collector Arthur Speyer acquired her (email correspondence, March 21, 2014). The lack of historical record before 1926 requires curators and academics to rely on presumed and pieced together histories to culturally contextualize her. Besides the notes taken by Gustav Conrau when he brought her back to Germany, fieldwork by the Australian anthropologist Robert Brain and American curator Tamara Northern help to provide some of the information that does exist. While the research done by Brain and Northern is extensive and insightful, it must be noted that they wrote during the 1970s and 1980s, seven to eight decades after the figure was already in the West. Their work contributes to the knowledge of Bangwa culture and artistic practices in general—but a culture and practice decades removed from the carving of the Bangwa figure in this study. This information can be applied to the specific figure of this study, but it cannot reveal any more about her individual creation and usage among the Bangwa. This is significant because only a few paragraphs worth of information about the figure exists, which is then regurgitated over and over in each exhibition catalog—and most of this information addresses *lefem* figures in general.⁹ Therefore, if an exhibition attempts to display something new or different about the Bangwa figure than what has already been displayed, it must approach the figure from a new perspective (such as women in African art or heroes in African art) and make inferences about her that match this alternative perspective. All additional

⁹ This information is detailed in the first chapter of this study.

Laufnr.	Zu- wies- Nr.	Von wem über- geben	Gegenstand	IL	Len
Nr.	Nr.	Nr.			
10525.	1/187	35.	„mthūngai“ Holzener weibliche Holzfigur 26 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10526.		34.	„bin tō.“ Holz. 22,5 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10527.		32.	„mthūngai“ Holz, weißl. Auf dem Kopf ein Vogel (eine zweite Figur ist abgeworfen) 49 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10528.	N		Holz, in der linken Hand einen Stock, in der rechten ? 33 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10529.	N	11.	„māngai“ Holz. Linke Hand abgeworfen 32 cm h.	Bangwa	105 202/29 im Spiegel
10530.			Holz. 49 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10531.	N	12.	„ngai adō“ Holz. mit Kind. 79 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10532.		32.	„shānō“ Holz. mit einem Kinde auf dem Rücken. 61 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10533.	N	32.	„ngō“ Holz, stehend, mit einem Kinde an der Hand. 79 cm h.	Bangwa	105
10534.			„shānō“ Klein Holzfigur 17 cm h.	Bangwa	105

Fig. 5. Inventory Book Record showing the deaccession of the Bangwa figure to Arthur Speyer from the Museum Für Völkerkunde. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

information published about the Bangwa figure deals with her provenance in the West. And thus I commence with her Western provenances.

The most important point in her early history is arguably her acquisition in 1926 by Arthur Speyer, a Berlin-based collector who specialized mostly in North American Indian art but

also bought and sold African art (Bolz 1993:69). Speyer's status as a dealer of art marks this acquisition as a possible turning point in which she ceased to be regarded as just an ethnographic object and began to also be considered as a work of art, a shift in discourse around which the Bangwa figure was apprehended. Notably, less than a decade after Speyer acquired and subsequently sold her, she appeared in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), *African Negro Art* (1935). The exhibition title explicitly uses the word "art" to make it clear that the objects included were considered as such. It is unclear how long Speyer owned the Bangwa figure before selling or trading her to the Parisian collector Charles Ratton. Speyer had acquired numerous African objects from the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin which he in turn sold to Ratton. Among the other African pieces from the Museum für Völkerkunde that the Berliner sold to the Parisian are: a *Fon* commemorative figure, a female bowl-holding Zua sculpture, and a Fang seated male figure holding a horn, all from the former German colony of Cameroon (Sotheby's 2007; Cotter 2011a; LaGamma and Drake Boehm 2007:136). I mention these other exchanges to emphasize the extent of trading African objects at this time. The fact that the objects were able to be traded from the museum to Speyer to Ratton all within the same decade means that there was a certain exchangeability of African objects at the beginning of the twentieth century. To return to Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1988), this exchangeability made African objects socially relevant: if a thing is desired by others for trade then it has a social function (Appadurai 1988:13). By the time Ratton acquired the Bangwa figure, the social function African objects in the West operated within modes of commodification, being bought and sold, and of display in art museums, making them objects of art.

Ratton did not begin collecting African art until 1926 (Dagen and Murphy 2013:66), but he was the leading dealer in the field by 1930 (Hombberger and Geary 2008:160). Before 1926, he mostly dealt in contemporary work of his time, namely in Cubism, Surrealism, and Modernism. In 1944 he co-founded the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* [Outsider Art] with Surrealist André Breton and Dadaist Henri-Pierre Roché. Ratton hosted a Surrealist object exhibition at his gallery in 1936, at same time that he was collecting African works. Interest in these Western artistic movements is related to his inclusion of African art in his gallery because these movements took some of their inspiration from *arts primitifs* (Dagen and Murphy 2013:14).¹⁰ Although Ratton only owned the figure for a short period of time, his relationship to her is well-known. Naturally, nearly every publication that mentions her provenance notes Ratton's ownership.

Because Speyer and Ratton only each owned the Bangwa figure for a short period of time, I now delve deeper into the different collections in which she has belonged and exhibitions in which she has appeared. I order the discussion chronologically, starting with Ratton's sale of the figure to Helena Rubinstein, in order to explore how the meaning of the Bangwa figure has evolved and built upon previous concepts of meaning in the West.

The Rubinstein Period: 1930s to 1966

Charles Ratton sold the Bangwa figure to cosmetics mogul Helena Rubinstein at some point in the 1930s. Rubinstein plays an interesting role in African art collecting at this time, as she amassed an extensive collection that she displayed in various ways. She can be credited with

¹⁰ "L'intérêt de Ratton pour les 'primitifs' est inséparable d'un milieu artistique qu'il fréquente, sans que l'on puisse savoir plus précisément comment il s'est trouvé mis en rapport avec ce milieu, celui du cubisme." [Ratton's interest for "primitive" art is inseparable from an artistic milieu that he frequented, with which one can more fully understand how he found himself in contact with this milieu, that of Cubism.]

introducing African art to a wider audience by decorating her beauty salons with sculptures. These displays were somewhere between a showcase of her personal artistic interests, an effective business move, and a way to publicly prove her high-brow taste (M. Clifford 2003:103-105). Whatever the motivation for display, Rubinstein's collection was popular enough and academically respected enough to be used to illustrate some of the first textbooks on west African sculpture (Ramsey 1982:108). And of course among Rubinstein's famed collection was the Bangwa figure.

The photograph below (Fig. 6) shows the Bangwa figure in Rubinstein's Paris apartment. The figure is displayed on a bookcase alongside other non-Western sculptures. She rests at floor-level or slightly above. A passerby would look down on the figure while she looks up, like a pet



Fig. 6. Helena Rubinstein's Paris Apartment. Date unknown. Available from: Tumblr, <http://titanium44.tumblr.com/post/28324364875> (accessed January, 2014).

or small child. However, someone sitting on the chairs would view her at eye level. It is difficult to write this off as a happy accident given Rubinstein's concern for her public image. She states in her autobiography: "Because my homes have been written about and photographed so often, and because they are filled with antique furniture and works of art, it does not mean that they are stuffy, un-lived-in places" (Rubinstein 1966:91). Thus it is obvious that she sought fashionable decor because she knew that her homes would be photographed and that she also sought a homey feel because she used her homes. The position of the Bangwa figure in this photograph must then be implicated in such a project of display.

Comparing Rubinstein's home display to that of museum exhibitions showcases the varying modes of display and collecting in which the figure appears. Here, no one would stare at her blankly. Two inches of plexiglass or a three foot high pedestal are not separating her from human interaction. Rather, she almost becomes part of the family in Rubinstein's apartment. She sits silently alongside those reading on the couch, making her more accessible and more quotidian. The quotidian quality of home decor contrasts sharply with the grandeur of a special exhibition at a big museum. The Bangwa figure had the opportunity to experience both extremes under Rubinstein's ownership. Rubinstein lent the Bangwa figure to the 1935 MoMA exhibition, *African Negro Art* and again two decades later to *Masterpieces of African Art* (1954-55) at the Brooklyn Museum.

At the time considered revolutionary in its methods, *African Negro Art* displayed African works for their visually artistic qualities and not from an ethnographic point of view. The objects were compared to Modernist works for their visual qualities as skillfully crafted pieces (Sweeney 1935). This quality of skill involved in their making is based on a Western understanding of

beauty and artistic achievement. That is not to say that the pieces were not highly regarded in their original contexts. Rather, it is a note as to why those specific pieces were chosen to be part of *African Negro Art*. The exhibition decontextualized African works to the extreme: even the “most minimal explanatory labels” were believed to take away from the high visual quality of the work (Berzock and Clarke 2010:8). Strangely, this results in a similarity between home display and the exhibition. Both in Rubinstein’s home and in *Africa Negro Art*, the Bangwa figure perches next to other African art objects with no explanation of why they are next to each other (Fig. 7). The Bangwa figure’s display alongside these other objects could be interpreted as purely aesthetic and not based on any shared histories or similarities between the sculptures.¹¹



Fig. 7. Soichi Sunami, Installation view of the exhibition *African Negro Art*. 1935, installation view, 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed April 7, 2014).

¹¹ The objects in the exhibition *African Negro Art* (1935) were actually placed mostly geographically, although this was not explicitly stated to the museum audience in the exhibition space. However, the female bowl-holding sculpture placed directly across from the Bangwa figure in the exhibition (Fig. 7) is actually from the Zua kingdom of Cameroon but was misidentified as Bangwa (Cotter 2011b).

We will see later how more recent exhibitions attempt to create shared histories between the Bangwa figure and other African art objects through exhibition themes that diverge from a purely geographic approach. Though both Rubinstein's home display and the MoMA exhibition were established with a visual focus, they do deviate from each conceptually and in how they approach physical display.

The stylistic differences in physical display are evident from the two photographs. Rubinstein housed the Bangwa figure in a partitioned wall unit. The back of the figure is flat against the back of the shelf, and she is protected on either side by partitions (Fig. 6). In the museum exhibition, the Bangwa figure is placed on a pedestal for a standing audience to view her at a reasonable height (Fig. 7). She has plenty of open space around her where a viewer could examine her from multiple angles. A March 19, 1935 review of the exhibition by Edward Alden Jewell in the *New York Times* praises this open space and credits that aesthetic strategy as making the installation "as fine as, no doubt, any museum has to its credit."

This attribution of empty white gallery space to a "fine" installation reveals certain expectations of a museum display at the time. Through such a display, the Bangwa figure is decontextualized from her original function and fulfills curator James Johnson Sweeney's goal of showing African art purely for its formal quality as being finely crafted and artistically rendered (Sweeney 1935). It is necessary to consider the lasting impact of equating art to white-walled exhibition spaces. Which museums continue to display art in this way? Which museums take radically different approaches to art?

The 1954-55 Brooklyn museum exhibition *Masterpieces of African Art*, another exhibition that borrowed the Bangwa figure from Rubinstein, also utilizes plenty of open gallery

space (Fig. 8). Nearly two decades after the MoMA exhibition, a *New York Times* reviewer again notes this quality, calling *Masterpieces of African Art* a “spacious and most effective installation.” The similar vocabulary between this October 21, 1954 review by Howard Devree and Jewell’s 1935 one should not be surprising. How could we expect much difference when Devree points out in the same article that *Masterpieces of African Art* was the first major exhibition of African art in the New York area since *African Negro Art* in 1935? Like reviews of the 1935 exhibition, Devree spends most of the article defending African art as fine art or referencing its influence on Modern painting and sculpture.



Fig. 8. *Masterpieces of African Art*. 1954-55, installation view. The Brooklyn Museum, New York. Available from: The Brooklyn Museum, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org> (accessed February, 2014).

Devree makes one clear distinction between the 1935 MoMA show and the 1954-55 Brooklyn Museum show: the latter is better. He maintains that earlier understandings of African art did not discriminate between “good” or “bad” works and instead adhered to a “faddish enthusiasm for all African art.” Devree goes on to praise *Masterpieces of African Art* curator Frederick R. Pleasants for his selection of artworks. Two observations can be made from Devree’s claims: (1) the field of African art was considered to be progressing, an ideal that we continue to see today and (2) the Bangwa figure made Pleasants’ cut of “good” African art. The 1935 exhibition showed 603 African objects (Sweeney 1935). *Masterpieces of African Art* in 1954-55 exhibited approximately a third as many objects (Brooklyn Museum). That the Bangwa figure was able to move forward with the next generation of African art points to the her impressive aesthetic and technical qualities. It also marks a step in her road to celebrityhood. The selection to include her in both major exhibitions so early on in the display of African art foreshadows her eventual prominence in the field of African art.

The sale of the Bangwa figure—and of Rubinstein’s estate—took place in 1966, a year after her death. Here, the Bangwa figure passed another landmark in her career by going for approximately \$26,000, a massive sum for African sculpture at the time. In discussing Rubinstein’s lot of African art, the *New York Times* (December 16, 1965) asserted that many of the pieces she owned were not beautiful and could only be appreciated by those with specialized interests. The Bangwa figure was thus either considered to be beautiful enough to garner \$26,000 or was esteemed by enough bidders with “specialized interest” to fetch that sum. Either interpretation again points to her eventual rise to fame. The idea of value or “perceived worth” of an object of art is explained by anthropologist Sally Price as “a combination of artistic fame and

financial assessment” (Price 1989:84). Using Price’s definition, I affirm that by 1966 the Bangwa figure had a significant “perceived worth” because (1) her artistic fame was established through the exhibitions *African Negro Art* (1935) and *Masterpieces of African Art* (1954-55) and (2) her financial assessment was confirmed by the 1966 auction. These examples also reveal that her “perceived worth” was created and believed by museums and collectors of African art. It is difficult to qualitatively prove that others outside of museum and collecting circles perceived her as being worthy. However, if we accept Ivan Karp’s assessment that museums uphold a certain authority (Karp and Lavine 1991:14-15), then we can extrapolate that the general public was most likely not challenging the “perceived worth” of the Bangwa figure.

I call the Bangwa figure valuable but refrain from claiming that she was already famous at the 1966 auction even though she was already included in two highly important exhibitions of African art. As far as I can tell, no major media publication directly mentions her sale at this auction. For instance, in the *New York Times*’ April 22, 1966 write-up of the auction, reporter Sanka Knox mentions a Senufo female figure that sold for \$27,000 and a Bambara dance headdress with a \$24,000 price tag. The Bangwa figure was not sold until the second part of the auction, on April 29. However, the April 30 *New York Times* article does not mention her \$26,000 sale. I uphold that the Bangwa figure was not yet famous enough to warrant a specific mention of her sale in 1966. In fact, a search of the *New York Times* archives yields no results for the Bangwa figure in particular until she sold again in 1990.¹² An inaccuracy in the *New York Times*’ reporting of that later auction claimed that the \$26,000 auction price in 1966 “was then the

¹² She is alluded to in a July 19, 1985 *New York Times* review of “The Art of Cameroon”. However, she is referred to with an indefinite article (*a* pair of Bamileke dancers) in 1985. In 1990, she is famous enough to be accompanied by a definite article (*the* Bangwa queen). The change from using *a* to using *the* implies that she was regarded as any example of Bangwa/Bamileke art pre-1990 and post-1990 was attributed a more singular identity.

record at auction for African art” (February 9, 1990). Of course, the Senufo figure sold for approximately \$1,000 more in 1966, but this small oversight illustrates the disparity in the Bangwa figure’s fame between 1966 and 1990. In 1966 she was not mentioned despite her auction success. In 1990 this previous auction suddenly became one of her defining features.

Moreover, later media mentions of the 1966 auction verify its importance in the realm of African art history and African art collecting. In 2001, French auctioneer François de Ricqlès said in a statement that his auction of the late Hubert Goldet’s estate was the most important auction of African art since the 1966 Rubinstein sale (*New York Times*, June 22, 2001). Then, in 2013, Sotheby’s claimed their sale of New York art dealer Allan Stone’s holdings to be the most significant African and Oceanic sale in New York since the 1966 auction (Sotheby’s, Artdaily). While media outlets did not dote over the Bangwa figure in 1966, it is obvious that she was part of a highly regarded sale of African art. These two mentions, in 2001 and in 2013, prove that the Rubinstein auction is still highly relevant to other sales of African art even half a century later.

This sale is therefore significant in the larger realm of African art history and collecting while remaining a prominent part of the Bangwa figure’s individual identity in regards to her historical representation. This individual historical representation relates to, or perhaps even surmounts, the association between Rubinstein and the figure. In terms of the field of African art history, it shows how the collections of well-known people—i.e. Helena Rubinstein and Allan Stone—are considered to be immensely important. Of course, each individual has his or her own taste. Therefore, what we consider to be extremely important African art may be—at least partially—influenced by the personal tastes of a few prominent collectors. For this reason, the Bangwa figure’s provenance is so interesting: she has been in the collections of multiple large-

scale or well-known collectors. She has presumably fit all of their tastes. Perhaps this contributes to her fame within the field of African art history and museum display.

The Franklin Period: 1966 to 1990

Los Angeles-based collector Harry A. Franklin purchased the Bangwa figure at the 1966 Rubinstein auction. While her formal artistic qualities always play a part in the Bangwa figure's career, Franklin was also dedicated to her cultural origins. This reflects a shift in the general academic approach to African art that was initiated by an academic of modern art, Robert Goldwater. Goldwater wrote a dissertation on primitivism in modern art that "provided a thorough grounding in both anthropological and aesthetic approaches to African art" (Berzock and Clarke 2010:10). Goldwater became the director of the Museum of Primitive Art in 1956, where he continued to integrate cultural context with the artwork. His influence can be seen in the approach to African art scholarship during the second half of the twentieth century that aimed to mix the artistic and ethnographic aspects of African art. Franklin's purchase of the Bangwa "King" believed to be the male counterpart to the female figure (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), exemplifies Franklin's philosophy of approaching the figure on a cultural-historical level.

Displaying the female and male figures together can be viewed as a way to pay homage to their original intended functions in Bangwa society and to the historical people they embody. Displaying the two figures together, through the fact that they depict two historical people, also acts as a teaching tool about Bangwa society. Who were these people? Why were sculptures of them carved? What was their relationship to each other? Franklin's purchase of the two figures

marked the first time they were in the same collection since 1926. At that time, Ratton had acquired the female figure but not the male from Arthur Speyer, thus making the pair of figures accumulate different histories and “social lives” (to borrow a term from Appadurai) in the West. Franklin was approached and later purchased the male figure when people learned that he had bought the female figure (V. Franklin, interview with the author, February 2, 2014). Exhibitions during the Franklin ownership such as *African Sculpture* (1970), *The Art of Cameroon* (1984), and *Expressions of Cameroon Art* (1986) educated the museum audience by displaying both figures together. The point of public displays, aside from entertainment, is to educate (Berzock and Clarke 2010:6-7). The museum educates the viewer about Bangwa society by showing features such as the role of ancestors and the relationship between men and women. The accompanying texts must explicitly state these details, but the sculptures themselves serve as visual references for understanding the artistic practices of the Bangwa peoples.

However, the figures were of course not used exclusively for educational purposes. The Bangwa female figure always resists the type of inflexible categorization that would suggest such. This is especially evident when she belonged to private collections which periodically lent her to museum exhibitions. Her alternation between private and public display allowed for a multiplicity of identities—both private and public, as a work of art and as a teaching tool. She resided in the Franklin household when she was not on public display. A similarity can be drawn between her function in the Franklin household and her previous home in Helena Rubinstein’s Paris apartment. She once again acted as a part of daily life. Valerie Franklin, daughter of Harry Franklin and successive owner of the Bangwa figure, recalls that the figure and other pieces of African art decorated the dining room of her childhood home (interview with the author,

February 2, 2014). Because her father was a collector, art was part of her quotidian. She does not recall many specific stories about the Bangwa figure because of this quotidian quality; anything out of the ordinary would change its status as such. However, as a young child, one of Valerie Franklin's friends ran screaming from a mask hanging on the wall (interview with the author, February 2, 2014), proving that visitors to the Franklin home were aware of the art surrounding them. It can be assumed, then, that the many young artists and other visitors that dined at the Franklin table observed the sculptures, including the Bangwa figure, that were displayed around the dining room. Therefore, the Bangwa figure had an audience in the Franklin home even though she did not overtly serve an educational role as she did in museum displays.

Notable for having three exhibition locations, the 1970 exhibition *African Sculpture*, organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. differs from the previous two exhibitions detailed in this chapter—*African Negro Art* (1935) and *Masterpieces of African Art* (1954-55)—in its inclusion of the Bangwa figure's male counterpart and in its hyper-visible grouping of artworks by country. In addition to the National Gallery, *African Sculpture* also travelled to the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery in Kansas City and to the Brooklyn Museum. An exhibition photograph from the Brooklyn Museum installation shows the Bangwa figure next to her male counterpart under a large title, "CAMEROON" (Fig. 9). The pair of Bangwa figures are placed next to masks that would have been danced. Performers move up and down to utilize different levels of dance, perhaps mimicked in the varying heights of the posts that display these



Fig. 9. *African Sculpture*. 1970, installation view. The Brooklyn Museum, New York. Available from: The Brooklyn Museum, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org> (accessed February, 2014).

masks.¹³ Could these danced masks be purposely placed next to the female Bangwa figure because she herself is dancing?

The “CAMEROON” display is juxtaposed next to one labeled “GABON”. While the distinction between the two displays is clear in the photograph, it is not apparent that the same definite distinction would be as explicit in person, especially because the titles are so high above eye-level. The two displays are set up almost symmetrically, with a case of masks on posts in the center and pedestals with wooden statues on either side of the cases. The two displays share a center border in the exhibition, just as the two countries of Cameroon and Gabon share a border

¹³ This display of masks could also be a response to critiques of previous exhibitions of African masks that displayed them flat against the wall. Contemporary art scholar Polly Savage notes that museum displays of masks suggest an absence—of the body and of performance, stating that “in recent years, curators and artists have made various attempts to compensate for the perceived absences of mask display” (2008:74).

geographically. The proximity of the Cameroon display to the Gabon display could also be a nod to some similarities between the two countries' artistic practices. This is probably because there are shared ethnic groups between the two countries according to the Murdock ethnicity map (1959).

Immediately noticeable in the display of the male figure next to the female is the height different of each figure's respective pedestal. On one hand, this may be aesthetic. It could appear awkward to have the two figures at the same height. On the other hand, this arrangement appears to favor the female figure over the male figure. The angle of the photograph cuts off half of the male figure, but the female figure's higher position would make her the more prominent of the two even in person. The female Bangwa figure is much more famous among African art enthusiasts, as the male's most recent auction price is nearly \$2million *less* than the female figure's most recent auction price (Christie's). Why, if both sculptures were made by the same hand or made as a pair, is one regarded as more monetarily valuable in sale and possible more aesthetically and educationally valuable in the museum exhibition than the other? The same question could be asked about any two artworks by the same artist, such as two paintings by Renoir or two sculptures by Michelangelo.

This installation image provides the opportunity of comparison between *African Sculpture* of 1970 (Fig. 9) with *Masterpieces of African Art* of 1954-55 (Fig. 8) and *African Negro Art* of 1935 (Fig. 7). The two previous exhibitions treated the Bangwa figure similarly to the way that marble statues from Rome and Greece are treated in the Louvre in Paris. The figure was positioned high on a pedestal so that the viewer interacted with her being at or above eye-level. The viewer was able to get close to the figure and examine her from multiple angles.

African Sculpture, contrarily, placed her on an undoubtedly shorter pedestal and included a barrier between her and the viewer by setting her back in a half-display case setting. It is possible that the design of her display was based on her increased monetary value. She was protected by being farther away from the museum viewers. The farther distance may have been taken into account when deciding the pedestal height. The shorter height could allow for easier viewer accessibility at that distance.

The next decade hosted exhibitions with the Bangwa figure that shared many characteristics with the 1970 exhibition *African Sculpture*. One significant exhibition was the 1984 National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution travelling exhibition, *The Art of Cameroon*. Again, the Bangwa figure was accompanied by her male counterpart in a display that aimed to provide cultural context for the artwork. Curator Tamara Northern included photographs of Cameroon life in the exhibition to add further contextualization. That the Natural History branch of the Smithsonian hosted the exhibition again proves that the aesthetic qualities of the work were not the central motivation for the exhibition.

One key way that exhibitions with the Bangwa figure in the 1980s differed from the 1970 exhibition is in their specificity. Besides *The Art of Cameroon* (1984) at the Smithsonian, the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History included her in *Expressions of Cameroon Art* (1986). Both of these exhibitions focused exclusively on art from Cameroon, not from the entire continent of Africa. After 1970, the Bangwa figure is not in another general survey exhibition of African art as a whole. Yes, the two exhibitions of the 1980s are of the few that focus only on

Cameroonian art.¹⁴ However, I maintain that later exhibitions—including the most recent—that include the Bangwa figure have very specific themes that differentiate them from being surveys of African art. These exhibitions take place after she was sold once again in 1990 to the Musée Dapper in Paris.

In 1990, Valerie Franklin auctioned off much of the collection that she inherited from her father, including the Bangwa figure. Franklin said that it nearly killed her to sell the figure but that she had to because she was taking her career in a new direction, away from running the gallery that her father had started (interview with the author, February 2, 2014). The Bangwa figure was famous enough at this time to create additional excitement over the auction: the *Los Angeles Times* predicted that she would set an auction record for African art (January 24, 1990) and the *New York Times* dedicated more than half of its coverage on the auction to the Bangwa figure (February 9, 1990). The Musée Dapper did set a record for a purchase of African art by paying \$3.4 million for her. According to the January 24, 1990 *Los Angeles Times* article, the previous record was set by a Benin bronze head at \$2.08 million in July of 1989.

A year later when Franklin donated her Oceanic collection to Dartmouth, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the Bangwa figure again (February 23, 1991). This time, writer Suzanne Muchnic, the same reporter who covered in auction in 1990, framed the sale of the Bangwa figure as a loss to the city of Los Angeles. Franklin agrees with Muchnic's assessment, citing that she wishes the collection could have stayed in her home city to join up with the Katherine White collection. Franklin says that the two collections together would have "rivalled [the collection at]

¹⁴ In 2007-2008, the Queensborough Community College Gallery organized an exhibition entitled *A Cameroon World*. They advertised the exhibition on their website as being the most comprehensive show of Cameroon art since *The Art of Cameroon* (1984), simultaneously showing respect for *The Art of Cameroon* and proving that there had not been many shows focused solely on Cameroonian art since the 1980s. *A Cameroon World* did not include the Bangwa figure among its 240 objects on display.

the Met” (interview with the author, February 2, 2014).¹⁵ The sentiment that something was lost for the city of Los Angeles somewhat blurs the notion of private and public property. The Bangwa figure legally belonged to Franklin, but Muchnic claims public ownership of Franklin’s collection in a certain sense. Perhaps Franklin’s tendency to often lend the figure to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art allows for this feeling of a community loss. Sharon Macdonald, a social anthropologist of museology, explains that the establishment of museums at the end of the eighteenth century allowed for privately owned art to be made public and “of the people” (2003:1-2). She goes on to explain that public museum displays are meant to create a sense of public inclusion (in theory, all are able to access a public museum) and therefore contribute to Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities. Therefore, Muchnic’s article that pitted the sale of the Bangwa figure as a loss to Los Angeles fits into Macdonald and Anderson’s theories on the creation of public/community sentiments. This is perplexing and intriguing: the Bangwa figure—a sculpture from the Grassfields of Cameroon—has helped to create a feeling of imagined community in Los Angeles, United States.

There is another interesting component to Muchnic’s 1991 article: an inaccuracy. She reports that the Bangwa figure sold for “more than double the record for an African artwork” at \$3.4 million even though her 1990 article cited a previous sale record of \$2.08 million. Obviously, \$3.4 million is not more than double \$2.08 million. Let us recall the *New York Times* mistake in 1990 that claimed that the 1966 sale of the figure set a record price for its time (\$26,000) even though a Senufo figure fetched a higher bid (approximately \$27,000) at the same auction (February 9, 1990). These mistakes are significant because they both, whether

¹⁵ White’s collection is now at the Seattle Museum of Art.

intentionally or not, sensationalize the Bangwa figure in a desire to associate her with superlatives. These superlatives cannot be written off as insignificant. The meaning of the Bangwa figure is derived not only from museum displays but also from other ways she is presented to the public. These newspaper articles are a prime example of meaning being construed outside of a museum setting. The public is able to interpret meaning only by the facts they are given. Therefore, exaggerated superlatives will be accepted as fact and then play a role in her accumulating fame.

This massive sale marks a huge change in the biography of the Bangwa figure. Regardless of any exaggeration, there is no doubt that her \$3.4 million sale to the Musée Dapper deserved attention. For the first time since 1926, private ownership ceased and she once again belonged to a museum collection, prescribing her a more public persona. To name a few of the implications of this, she no longer inhabited private homes and therefore retired her quotidian characteristics, and she now became associated with the mission of an organization rather than the inclinations of an individual.

The Musée Dapper Period: 1990-present

I now fast forward almost two decades into the Musée Dapper's ownership of the Bangwa figure to its 2008 exhibition *Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] for three reasons. Firstly, it is perhaps the largest exhibition that the Musée Dapper has held with the Bangwa figure. Secondly, this is the first time that a large-scale exhibition she was in had a theme other than just geographic. Themes such as these attempt to draw a more diverse crowd to the museum with interests that match the exhibition themes rather than just interests in

African art. A range of topics in exhibitions and big “blockbuster” shows aim to draw big crowds (Karp and Lavine 1991:11). Finally, I begin with this exhibition because it was covered not just in traditional media outlets such as newspapers but also on websites and via video online.

The theme of the exhibition, women, impacts who discussed the exhibition and how. For instance, the French online women’s magazine, *Terrafemina* reported on the exhibition (January 23, 2009). This web site does not typically write about African art, but instead has the mission to provide information of interest to women for their professional and personal daily lives. The website does not discuss particular objects such as the Bangwa figure but instead praises the whole of *Femmes dans les arts d’Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] as “l’occasion de découvrir une nouvelle forme de féminité” [an occasion to discover a new form of femininity]. The word “new” implies that these art objects provide a different view of femininity than the French public is used to seeing. Therefore, it reinforces Africa as “other” or as different from the West. Some of the comments on this article prove an unfamiliarity with African art in this same “otherizing” way. For example, one commenter notes that African art is “not really her style” and another writes that African art is “a strange art.”¹⁶ In addition to the meaning of these comments in particular, the function of a comments section in general is an interesting addition to the construction and interpretation of the meaning of the Bangwa figure. Comparing the above comments to the superlative language of newspaper articles makes it obvious that interpretations of the Bangwa figure are not all the same. Someone—such as these commenters—who is not familiar with African art sees it in a much different light than the specialized art critics of newspapers. The comments section simultaneously acts as a record of public opinion and as a

¹⁶ Alex0110 comments on May 20, 2010: “l’art africain n’est pas trop mon style” [African art is not really my style] and isa169 comments on June 5, 2010: “l’art africain est un art étrange” [African art is a strange art].

platform for the formation of public opinion. This online account of the exhibition shows that meaning is interpreted differently in various circles. The meaning of the Bangwa figure here is not the same as her meaning among African art historians. This is an example of how the Bangwa figure is understood by those without academic training in African art history. However, the online feminist magazine does try to engage with the exhibition—and by extension with the Bangwa figure—which allows for additional public exposure.

Fitting to the multiplicity of the Bangwa figure's interpreted meanings, the exhibition itself aimed to evoke the multiplicity of feminine representations in Africa (Falgayrettes-Leveau 2008:11). The representation chosen for the Bangwa figure in the introduction of the exhibition catalog deals with her feminine aesthetic qualities: “Ses formes, des seins au galbe généreux, une taille étroite, des cuisses puissantes et un fessier projeté vers l’arrière, sont remarquables du point de vue plastique” [Her forms, her generously curved breasts, thin waist, powerful thighs, and buttocks protruding to the back are remarkable physical qualities] (Falgayrettes-Leveau 2008:17). This seems to make sense with the exhibition theme of women, but there is a bit of an uncomfortable sexualized tone. Later on, the text details cultural practices of the Bangwa and the figure's role in these practices, emphasizing her feminine role in fertility—because she is the mother of twins—rather than in sexuality. In both distinct representations of the Bangwa figure, her gender is emphasized due to the exhibition theme of *Femmes dans les art d’Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa]. Similarly, *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), like all exhibitions, tailors its language to the exhibition theme when discussing the Bangwa figure. She is described as powerful and strong, fitting characteristics for a legendary leader: “The figure, whose knees are bent, appears suspended in

motion, her weight supported by her proper right leg. In her right hand she grasps a rattle, her arm bent at the elbow. The dynamism of this attitude is further accentuated by the fact that its subject gazes upward with mouth open, her head at an angle” (2011:125).

The *Heroic Africans* exhibition is one of the few exhibitions within the last decade that has featured Bangwa figure. The Musée Dapper does not exhibit the Bangwa figure often but brings her out of storage for special exhibitions. The reasons behind her infrequent appearance are only known to the Musée Dapper. Possibly, she is too expensive to exhibit; the insurance on a \$3.4 million sculpture must be high. Perhaps the museum does not want to risk damages to her even if a borrowing institution can afford insurance. Her head is cracked, and she has been missing her left hand for quite a while, possibly ever since she left the continent.¹⁷ These damages may weaken the structure of the sculpture, making her susceptible to more injury. Furthermore, we must not forget that she is approximately 120 years old and thus made of wood of the same antiquity.

However speculative the reasons that she is sparingly displayed may be, the effects are observable. Now, she does not have the quotidian characteristics that she had while in the private homes of Rubinstein or the Franklin family. By being under museum ownership and not on permanent collection display, every single one of her appearances is noteworthy. It becomes a media event every time she is lent to a special exhibition, which only augments her fame. Her rarity makes her more valuable and reaffirms her status as one-of-a-kind. Look no further than

¹⁷ The 1926 deaccession record (Fig. 5) from the Museum Für Völkerkunde notes that she was missing her left hand: “Linke Hand abgebrochen”. This was less than thirty years after Gustav Conrau brought the figure from Cameroon to Germany.

media coverage of the *Heroic Africans* exhibition to see just how much fanfare surrounds her appearance.¹⁸

What does a museum do when they want to include the Bangwa figure in an exhibition but cannot? Wendy Grossman, curator of *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* (2011) desperately wanted to include the Bangwa figure in her show. She wished to display the figure alongside Man Ray's photographs that included the Bangwa figure to explain the subjectivity of the camera lens. Despite offering to change the dates of her exhibition, she was not granted a loan of the figure and had to settle for using a variety of images of the figure to illustrate her point (interview with the author, January 30, 2014). Likewise, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris was denied access to the figure for *Charles Ratton, l'invention des arts "primitifs"* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of "Primitive" Art] (2013). They also decided to use a photograph in its place. Because the Bangwa figure is rarely loaned to other museums, she now possesses a sort of mystical aura as a result. It is difficult to see her in person. She cannot be replaced by another sculpture, proven by the fact that when she is seen, it is a big deal. There is also something to be said about the use of images of her as a stand-in. Importantly, replicas are not used but rather photographic representations of her. The next chapter delves into this notion of representing and appropriating the Bangwa figure in various ways, whether it be for an exhibition or as its own artistic expression.

Representations and appropriations of the Bangwa figure reimagine her in multiple ways, just as private collectors, museums, and curators have added to her ceaselessly changing identity. The Bangwa figure constantly resists a singular identity. She has been both an aspect of daily life

¹⁸ See the discussion in the first chapter of this study on the review by Holland Cotter, a *New York Times* art critic, in which he calls the Bangwa figure a "Wonder Woman".

and a rare celebrity headliner. She provides context for understanding Modernist art (*African Negro Art*, 1935) and for understanding African art as a whole (*Masterpieces of African Art*, 1954-55 and *African Sculpture*, 1970). She is part of a pair (*The Art of Cameroon*, 1984) and one-of-a-kind (1966 Rubinstein auction and 1990 Franklin auction). She is noted for her femininity and for her strength. Her physical qualities are praised for their fluidity; she dances even though she is physically stagnant. This air of movement serves as a convenient metaphor for her always dynamic and shifting meanings. She does not hold just one title at a time but rather holds a fragmented jumbled mixture of each of them at the same time, with certain aspects being highlighted at certain times within different contexts.

This fragmented mixture of meaning is extremely post-structuralist in nature. Roland Barthes points out that discourse formation, meaning our discussed meaning of the figure, is a product of various codes and not of a singular underlying structure (Olsen 1990:165). The various codes at work here are competing local and global histories: her original function vs. her museum/collecting function; local/Western understandings of African art vs. global realities of colonization; the uncertainty of her past vs. interpretations of her in the museum present. The mixture of meanings that she possesses are not often officially pinned down but make appearances through exhibition catalogs, reviews, and spoken word. Consequently, her meaning is as variable as it is. It is always up to the reader's or viewer's interpretation.

This chapter looks at the "life history" or "career" of the Bangwa figure in the West chronologically. Appadurai calls for this "life history" to be regarded in terms of knowledge distribution (1988:41), which is apparent through the various exhibition displays and (sometimes erroneous) media coverage of the Bangwa figure. I use this framework outlined by Appadurai in

order to navigate how meaning is construed and interpreted. I explore the balance and imbalance between defining the figure's Western meaning in terms of her ethnographic history vs. defining it in terms of her status as a work of art. The Bangwa figure's various exhibitions, collections, and auctions mark different stages in the figure's "career", but each of these stages must be regarded in terms of the others.

What is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use.
[Kopytoff 1986:67]

3. Employing Function with Representations & Appropriations

The above statement, by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, can be applied to the Bangwa figure insofar that she has become alien both physically and conceptually in the West. Firstly, her physical displacement from the Cameroon Grassfields to the West—and her continuous travel to museums and exhibitions around the Western world—renders her alienated from her homeland to become an alien entity in Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the concept of a *lefem* figure is alien to most Western museum audiences. How she is consequently “put to use” in private collections and in the museum setting is explored in the previous chapter. This chapter questions how she is conceptually imagined and “culturally redefined” in the West through appropriations and representations. How does her image—used photographically and video-graphically—reflect ways in which Western culture constructs her meaning? What is the cultural significance of literary and artistic allusions to her?

The Bangwa figure’s resumé in the West is riddled with appropriations and representations. In photography, she becomes an artistic medium, used in the creation of new artworks. In painting, her form and rhythmic qualities might be inspiration for Modernist painters. She makes brief appearances in video and is referenced in literature. Each representation gives her a new functional significance, and each new significance must be understood within a temporal and cultural context (Kopytoff 1986:68).¹⁹ This anthropological

¹⁹ “A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories.”

approach will provide insight into how the Bangwa figure—and perhaps how African art in general—is used in Western culture. It proves that while she may be considered “alien” or of another culture, she plays a role in her current physical location. She does not only carry the cultural meaning bestowed upon her in her original context but also continues to accumulate the cultural meaning of each appropriation of her. Each time the figure appears in a different medium should be regarded as insight into the interconnectedness of varying milieu from the early twentieth century to the present day. This interconnectedness should be interpreted as the way in which layers of meaning build upon each other and should serve as a reminder that the figure does not at any one time belong solely to the art historical world of African sculpture or to the artistic world of photography or to the literary world of anthropological writing. Rather, she serves a cultural role in each of these realms simultaneously.

Photographic Representations

Photographic representations of the Bangwa figure function similarly to the readymades of the early twentieth century that incorporate already fabricated objects into artworks, but they also differ from readymades in that the Bangwa figure remains her own physical entity. While readymades recuperate objects physically and conceptually, photography does not change the physical. Therefore, the Bangwa figure remains autonomous in and of herself while simultaneously becoming part of a separate physical representation—the photographic print. This duality adds to her multitude of meanings and interpretations. She is never just a model in a photograph by Man Ray nor is she just a sculptural being. Her existence in both realms complicates the question of her role and identity in the West, especially in Western museums

where she is considered to be a work of art. Likewise, some photographs in which she appears are regarded as their own works of art. She is at once part of multiple histories: the history of the Bangwa peoples and culture, the history of African art in the West, and the history of photography and its artistic trends of the 1930s. These histories converge and interact with each other very clearly through the Bangwa figure.

The figure's appearance in *African Negro Art* (1935) led to two photographic representations, one by Man Ray (Fig. 10) and the other by Walker Evans (Fig. 11). American-born Man Ray (1890-1976) was not only known for his photography. He was an artist of many mediums: painting, printmaking, poetry, etc. By the time he moved to Paris in 1921, he had dropped painting as his preferred artistic medium in lieu of photography, where he could explore the limits of the medium in conjunction with his obsession of light. He travelled within the artistic circles of Paris, living in the Montparnasse quarter where many other artists lived. Therefore he was influenced by the Dadaist, Surrealist, and Modernist movements happening in Paris at the time. In his heyday he charged one thousand francs per sitting for his popular photographic portraits (Baldwin 1988:ix-xii, 81-95, 99-100, 116). Walker Evans (1903-1975), also born in America, would come to be known for his photographs of the Great Depression while working with the Farm Security Administration. He was hired as a photographer at the MoMA in 1930, a year after its opening. Between 1930 and his 1935 commission to photograph the exhibition *African Negro Art*, Evans' career began to grow. The commission in 1935 came from museum treasurer Tom Mabry with the intent to give the photographs of African sculptures to black colleges and universities in the South as cultural history (Rathbone 1995:53-63, 99-100).

Even though the Bangwa figure was the subject of the two American photographers' works within a year of each other (1934 and 1935, respectively), their approaches are strikingly different, both in intention and in terms of aesthetics. The exact details of how Man Ray came to photograph the sculpture are unknown, however he composed over half a dozen images with the figure, some of the figure by herself and others with a nude model of unknown ethnicity (Grossman 2009:19, 135). Curator Wendy Grossman incorporated both photo sets into her exhibition *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* (2010-11), again proving that appropriations of the figure are highly regarded in the art world. On the other hand, Evans' photographs were made to be exhibition records. He photographed all of the images that are



Fig. 10. Man Ray, Untitled. ca. 1934, Silver and gelatin print. From: *Arts of Africa: 7000 Years of African Art*. Milan, 2005. Pp. 367.



Fig. 11. Walker Evans, Untitled. ca. 1934, Silver and gelatin print, Man Ray Trust, Long Island. From: *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Alisa LaGamma, 2011. Figure 116.

incorporated in the 1935 exhibition catalog of *African Negro Art*. Therefore, she is pictured alone in all of his photographs. Before comparing the photographic approaches of the two photographers further, let us first look at each one individually.

Man Ray's photographs with the nude model are compelling, and confusion over the model's ethnicity "points to the fact that Man Ray's photograph cannot be firmly placed within a dichotomous racial discourse that tends to be the norm" (Grossman 2009:135). This is in contrast to the discourse surrounding Man Ray's 1926 photograph *Noire et blanche* [Black and White] (Fig. 12). This image and its reversal negative print (not pictured) are often cited for their juxtaposition between the white model, Kiki of Montparnasse, and an African a Baule-style mask. Art historian Whitney Chadwick cites that the socio-historical context in which this image



Fig. 12. Man Ray, *Noire et blanche* [Black and White]. 1926, gelatin silver print, 21.59 x 28.58 cm. Private Collection (Unknown Site). Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed April 7, 2014).

was produced included Parisian social spaces that fetishized and made exotic female sexuality and cultural otherness (1995:8). Furthermore, the caption that accompanied *Noire et blanche* [Black and White] in *Vogue* (1926) describes the model as “bound to primitive nature” and then as “becoming today the evolved white creature” (translated in Grossman and Manford 2006:139). Returning to the photograph of the Bangwa figure, it becomes apparent that because the model in the Bangwa figure photograph is racially ambiguous, it is difficult to make the same black-white racial argument that is made in regards to *Noire et Blanche* [Black and White]. That being said, one of Man Ray’s photographs of the Bangwa figure was used the year after its conception (1935) in *Paris Magazine* to illustrate an article entitled *Une nuit de Singapour* [One Night in Singapore] about male fantasies of exotic women. Therefore, her racial ambiguity can add to reading the photograph—and by extension the Bangwa figure—as a sexualized and exotic woman.

There are two photographs of the Bangwa figure with the model, and in the more highly circulated of the two (Fig. 10), the model rests her head against the figure’s knees and looks directly at the camera out of the side of her eyes.²⁰ The figure’s gaze is pitted up and to the right of the frame, as though she is looking longingly into the distance.²¹ The model’s right arm is interlaced through the figure’s leg, and her wrist is decorated with a thick bangle that mirrors the

²⁰ Curator of *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*, Wendy Grossman, notes that the less common photograph (which incorporates all of the nude model’s body) was printed posthumously with the consent of Man Ray’s wife. Grossman voiced her concerns over the use of this posthumous print so iconically for the Quai Branly’s exhibition *Charles Ratton, l’invention des arts “primitifs”* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of “Primitive” Art] (2013) when she spoke at a symposium for the exhibition in September 2013 in Paris. The posthumous printing means that the physical photograph has been available for less time than the one in Figure 9. Therefore, it is not surprising that the one in Figure 9 seems to appear more often in art historical texts.

²¹ One has to wonder what the effect of the image would be if the Bangwa figure were to look directly at the camera and the model to look away. Walker Evans’ photographs do address the figure straight-on, which could serve as a speculation of this purposed perspective. However, Evans’ style differs so greatly from Man Ray’s that it is difficult to call such a speculation a hypothesis.

bracelet on the figure's wrist. The model's left arm is cut out of the frame; the Bangwa figure's missing left arm is turned away from the lens, almost hiding its amputation. In all of his photographs with the figure, Man Ray plays with light and shadows. His highly stylized representations of the figure made it an artistic medium, as photographs helped to transform objects "from artifact to art in the Western reception of African cultural production" (Grossman 2009:4).

In contrast, Walker Evans' photograph (Fig. 11) of the figure faces her head-on with more even lighting than Man Ray's. The background is plain, as it would be for a photograph of object documentation. The figure fills almost the entire frame so that all attention is solely on her. Where the shadows and angles of Man Ray's photographs hid the Bangwa figure's imperfections, Evans' bare-bones approach and plentiful light source makes her missing left hand, left knee abrasion, and crack down her chest blatantly apparent. The approach was "almost clinical", reminiscent of outdated—and sometimes racist—physical anthropology (Dagen and Murphy 2013:114). Although Evans may have intended a documentary and objective approach, Grossman (2009) details the subjectivity of all photography, noting that Evans worked within a Modernist aesthetic.²² Dagen and Murphy, curators of *Charles Ratton, l'invention des arts "primitifs"* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of "Primitive" Art] also note that Evans was influenced by the Modernist aesthetic—and that while the photographs are reminiscent of racist physical anthropology, this had no influence on Evans. (2013:114). However, these statements are not intended to separate Evans so completely from the African objects he photographed since

²² For a more extensive comparison between the photographs of Man Ray and Walker Evans, see Grossman (2009).

the Modernist aesthetic itself was so influenced by African art and artifacts (Berzock and Clarke 2011:7).²³

Evans approached the figure with a documentary style, which reflects his general photographic style: “His American pictures were applauded as embracing a documentary style” (Webb 200:14). And yet, because he was commissioned by the museum to photograph the objects of the 1935 exhibition for them to be used as educational tools to teach about African art, these photographs were viewed as “historical documents” and not as artistically documentary (Webb 2000:13-14). Evans photographs were used to create a portfolio of 477 photographs from the exhibition’s 603 objects, which at the time was distributed seven historically black colleges in the South (Webb 2000:13; Grossman 2009:48). This commission creates a different kind of relationship between Evans and the Bangwa figure than that which existed between Man Ray and the Bangwa figure. Man Ray, often a fashion photographer, was presumably allowed more artistic freedom than Evans. While there is no physical documentation of this presumption, we can imagine that the different poses and angles that Man Ray utilises in contrast to Evans’ straight-on approach are due to this. It is also useful to acknowledge once more that Evans photographed at least 477 works for this commission, all of which were expected to have enough uniformity to be incorporated into an educational text.

The important takeaway is that both Man Ray and Evans’ representations of the figure redefine her function within each of their respective artistic subjectivities but also within the Modernist movement. By function here I mean specifically within the Western context. Her

²³ “Fueled by interest on the part of modernist European artists, the 1920s brought a increasing emphasis on the aesthetics on African art, and, with it, a narrowing vision of what was considered worthy of museum display.”

function, or role, is expanded to include any of the representations or appropriations in which she appears. Man Ray once said that “A camera alone does not make a picture. To make a picture, you need a camera, a photographer, and above all a subject. It is the subject alone that determines the interest of the photograph” (in Baldwin 1988:xi). Therefore, we must look at the subject and how the subject is represented. The Bangwa figure, of course, functions as the subject of the photographs.

The usage of Man Ray’s photographs has a long and on-going history. As previously mentioned, one of Man Ray’s photographs of the Bangwa figure illustrated the article *Une nuit de Singapour* [One Night in Singapore] (1935) in *Paris* magazine that fetishized exotic women and was also recently used in the Musée du Quai Branly’s 2013 exhibition *Charles Ratton, l’invention des arts “primitifs”* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of “Primitive” Art] to show the legacy of the twentieth century Parisian art dealer. These two cases are a prime example of how photographic representations can be re-appropriated and skewed to fit specific discourses. While this can be said for nearly every use of any photograph, these two examples specifically illustrate how the Bangwa figure was used in the 1930s versus how she is used today. The same image, almost eighty years later, makes two very different points. In the context of *Une nuit de Singapour* [One Night in Singapore], she is used as a general illustration. In *Charles Ratton, l’invention des arts “primitifs”* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of “Primitive” Art] she is used to look at a historical European figure, Charles Ratton. It is necessary here to be self-reflexive and realize that the same photograph is being used in this study to fit a discourse as well, one on the Bangwa figure’s role in Western museums and collections. Being cognizant of the inevitability of representation and appropriation will hopefully lead to more culturally and historically sensitive

articulations of the figure. We saw this in the last chapter with exhibitions of the figure herself as well, as “there is no exhibition without construction and therefore—in an extended sense—appropriation” (Karp and Lavine 1991:34).

Let us look more closely at the *Charles Ratton, l'invention des arts “primitifs”* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of “Primitive” Art] (2013) exhibition to see how photographs, which are representations of the Bangwa figure, become representations and appropriations themselves. It is necessary to note that the exhibition featured only the Man Ray photograph of the Bangwa figure and not the physical figure herself. Of course, the Quai Branly wanted to include the Bangwa figure in their exhibition but were not granted the loan by the Musée Dapper, the museum that now owns her (Grossman, interview with the author, January 30, 2014).²⁴ That they chose to use a photographic representation—either as a replacement to the actual figure or despite not having the actual figure—raises some questions. Is her representation considered almost as good as having “the real thing”? What does the representation imply about the figure that showing her on her own would not imply? The representation of her becomes the definition of her in her absence. Her original function is disregarded and she operates only within the context of her Western experiences. In this case, a museum goer only sees the photograph of her and can only be expected to understand her within the context of the photograph within the exhibition. This is problematic for obvious reasons.

There are, however, multiple types and degrees of appropriation. Let us turn now to a use of the Man Ray photograph that attempts to uphold meanings of her original function while embracing the appropriation. New York art dealer Damon Brandt features the same Man Ray

²⁴ See discussion in the second chapter of this study.

photograph on his website under a section entitled “inspiration”. For Brandt, the inspiration does not come solely from Man Ray or from the Bangwa figure but from the two together. Because he collects a variety of art forms—he counts tribal art, photography, and contemporary art among his expertise—Brandt searches for creative parallels between art forms that differ temporally and geographically (interview with the author, January 10, 2014). Brandt’s approach coincides with Grossman’s (2009) call to view the photographs within their cultural context while still considering the Bangwa figure’s own history.

In terms of the Bangwa figure, Brandt points out her bracelets in the Man Ray photograph. Brandt played a large role in building the John B. Elliott collection that is now at the Princeton University Art Museum. Among the objects in the collection is a series of ivory bracelets similar to the serrated bracelet that the Bangwa figure wears on her right wrist.²⁵ In describing the bracelets of Elliott’s collection, Brandt says that they are “exquisite” and are his personal connection to the Bangwa “Queen” (interview with author, January 10, 2014). On this level, it seems as though a photograph of the Bangwa figure alone, either an official museum photograph or one of Walker Evans’ would suffice. However, the inspiration that Brandt takes from the Man Ray photograph does not stop at the figure herself. The representation of the figure includes other aspects, such as the model, that contribute to a reading of the image as a whole. These aspects are considered in Brandt’s use of the photograph.

Brandt draws attention to this nude model in the photograph, bringing the argument back to female sexualization. But he does so in a positive way. Instead of arguing that the photograph shows a racialized sexualization of female bodies, he shares his personal reaction to the model:

²⁵ Brandt is quick to point out that the John B. Elliott collection was built in the 1980s before there were widespread restrictions on ivory importation.

“Quite frankly, not to be coy, I was also very seduced by how beautiful the woman was in the photograph as well. There is a sexual and sensual aspect to my relationship with art, and that was specific to that photograph” (interview with author, January 10, 2014). In this case, an artwork that may not have had the original intention to be sexualized (the Bangwa figure) becomes an inspiration for someone partly because of the way it is juxtaposed against a beautiful female in an appropriation of it. The sexuality is not crass, but as Brandt states, is sensual. Brandt’s use of Man Ray’s photograph provides an alternative way to view a representation that treats it as “inspiration” rather than as a definition of the Bangwa figure. This example dually shows how function and meaning of the figure are constantly reconstituted. Here, she is functioning as inspiration and has a sexual (though not negative) meaning. The use of photographic representations must be considered in relation to the figure herself at all times. The photograph, while physically separate from the figure, is not ontologically so.

Walker Evans’ photograph (Fig. 11) of the Bangwa figure has also appeared in various contexts but is not often used as its own work of art in the same way that Man Ray’s photographs are used. Equally interesting is the non-use of photographic representations, which can reveal other information. For example, Evans’ photograph was not in the exhibition catalog for the Met Museum’s 2000 exhibition *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935*. Without knowing the editing process used to create that exhibition catalog, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions. However, it is still useful to this study to hypothesize why a representation would not be used. Perhaps the figure is not as famous as her monetary value makes us inclined to believe—remember that she sold for \$3.4 million only ten years prior. Or maybe the editors of the *Perfect Documents* exhibition catalog did not want to turn the focus on a single sculpture but

rather maintain a general discussion on Evans' commission. Possibly, they desired to showcase other fine examples of African art that are not given as much attention as the Bangwa figure is typically given. These three possibilities all offer different interpretations of her role in Western exhibitions.

Evans' photographs of the 1935 MoMA exhibition, as previously stated, were circulated among historically black colleges in the South and were also available for purchase.²⁶ Regrettably, none of these colleges have record of how the portfolio may have been used and most do not even have record of receiving it (email correspondences with the author, January 14, 2014-February 7, 2014). While some speculate that the portfolio was used as a teaching tool for black students, its intended purpose, it is unclear that any of the schools extensively used the portfolio at all. The intentions of a representation or appropriation are not always fulfilled. The extent to which the intentions of Evans' photographs were disregarded and why remains a mystery. To revisit Igor Kopytoff's point cited at the beginning of this chapter, we must view appropriations within their culturally constituted categories. What is culturally significant about Evans' portfolio being used or not being used by historically black colleges? The gift itself is significant because it shows an attempt to make art accessible to more than the urban elite. This was the goal of the MoMA treasurer, Tom Mabry (Rathbone 1995:100). Its use would be significant in relation to the Bangwa figure because it implies that students at these colleges might have used her image in their understanding of the African continent. Gifting the portfolio to historically black colleges can be viewed as historically relevant as a continuation of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s that viewed African art as important as both cultural heritage

²⁶ For a complete list of institutions that received as a gift or that purchased the Walker Evans portfolio of photographs from the 1935 MoMA exhibition "African Negro Art", see Webb (2000:102).

and artistic inspiration for African Americans (Berzock and Clarke 2011:8). That the portfolio was maybe not widely used by these colleges also has its cultural implications. What a white man in the New York elite arts circle thought was useful may not have been for black students in the South.



Fig. 13. Photographer Eliot Elisofon photographing two Bangwa sculptures for the African Sculpture exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, January 1970. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gallery Archives.

Either way, because the first commissioned photographs of the Bangwa figure began with her first large-scale exhibition, *African Negro Art* (1935), her photographic representations have been considered in many of her other exhibition appearances. Even if the photographs themselves do not appear in the later exhibitions, there is at least mention of them in exhibition and auction catalogs (Dagen and Murphy 2013; LaGamma 2011; Sotheby's 1990). Her photographic representations have thus become somewhat synonymous with the figure herself, even though they are physically autonomous of her. She is tied to the photographs and the photographs to her. The history of the Bangwa figure is therefore influenced by her Western history perhaps as much it is by her original function. Or rather, a Western understanding of the figure is positioned within her entire life history to the present-day and is not exclusive to her original context.

More recently, as in 1970, famed African art photographer Eliot Elisofon (1911-1973) photographed the Bangwa figure (Fig. 13). Elisofon is mostly known for his photographs of African cultures from 1947 to 1973 (Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African Art). He was commissioned to photograph the Bangwa figure and her male counterpart, in conjunction with the exhibition *African Sculpture* (1970). These photographs are more similar to Walker Evans' appropriations in terms of intended function than Man Ray's. While all three sets of photographs were commissioned, both Elisofon's and Evans' were meant to be used as museum records. I give this final example to show the extent of commissioned photographic representations of the Bangwa figure. I now turn to another commissioned representations of the Bangwa figure, this time through film.

Film Appearances

To my knowledge, the Bangwa figure makes one appearance in professional film.²⁷ In this 1953 film, *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die], filmmakers Chris Marker and Alain Resnais critique how colonialism has impacted perceptions of African art. The medium of film differs from photography in that film can be narrated and put to music. This narration and music is intentionally used to elicit certain emotions from the viewer. Whereas the the previous photographic representations rely on written text—notably not text written by the photographers themselves—the film *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die] incorporates narration written by the filmmakers.²⁸ The black and white film showcases a plentitude of African sculptures with a single narrator commenting on the implied prejudices in how African art was treated. It famously begins with the words: “Quand les hommes sont morts, ils entrent dans l’histoire. Quand les statues sont mortes, elles entrent dans l’art” [When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art]. Marker’s script is well-suited for the Bangwa figure, who was considered more animate than a mere relic among the Bangwa but it is presumed to be an inanimate sculpture in a museum (Harter 1986:313).²⁹

²⁷ It is possible that the Bangwa figure had another interaction with cinema in 1937 for the French premier of the American film *The Green Pastures* (1936), a film by Marc Connelly and William Keighley in which African American actors perform scenes from the Bible, supposedly from the perspective of rural, black Americans. Charles Ratton organized an exhibition of African sculptures in conjunction with this film. Helena Rubinstein was among the lenders for the exhibition at the Théâtre Edouard VII. Curator Maureen Murphy revealed to “Tribal Magazine” that they discovered evidence of the exhibition while researching for the Quai Branly’s 2013 Charles Ratton exhibition (Martinez-Jacquet 2013:81). Murphy does not mention the Bangwa figure directly, but Rubinstein did own the figure at this time. Of course, it would not be an appropriation of the figure but rather an exhibition of her if she did appear in Ratton’s “The Green Pastures” exhibition. Her inclusion in the exhibition is mere speculation, but speculations are not useless. They reveal how the figure is *expected* or *accepted* to be presented.

²⁸ The contrast between written versus spoken text will be revisited later in this chapter.

²⁹ See discussion in the first chapter of this study.

The idea of death in African sculpture was shared by Parisian art dealer Charles Ratton, who owned the Bangwa figure at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ratton said “La sculpture nègre est morte maintenant, avec les dieux” [African sculpture is dead now, with the gods] (in Dagen and Murphy 2013:28). This comment can be interpreted in terms of Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous “God is dead” statement. Simply put, the practice of African sculpture is a phenomenon of the past, as is belief in gods. Marker’s film advertises his belief that colonialism corrupted traditional African art forms (Lupton 2006:35-36). According to Marker and Ratton, these forms are now dead, and Marker uses the Bangwa figure to make this point. She takes on yet another function, not glorified as a piece to be put in a museum but instead glorified as one of the last of a dying breed.

The film was commissioned by the organization *Présence Africaine* to be a film about African art. Due to its obvious anti-colonialism agenda, the film was banned by the *Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie (CNC)* in 1953. An edited version was released—against the will of Marker and Resnais—in 1960, and the full version was authorized in 1965 (Lupton 2005:35-36). Of course, by 1965 France had already given up all of its mainland African colonies to the independence movement. Internationally, the African American struggle for equality was well under way by 1965. Therefore, the lift of the ban a decade after the film’s conception fits into its respective international socio-political climate. Ten years after the film was made, the appropriation of the Bangwa figure and other African sculptures in the film as a tool used against the colonial mission was finally viewable by the French public.

In the film itself, the Bangwa figure is featured briefly—for about five seconds of the 30-minute film—without context or explanation of who or what she is. While the sculpture does not

move, the tight shot shakes just enough to prove that it is a video recording and not a still image. None of the statues are labeled in any way. Therefore, the context of the Bangwa figure and of all of the other statues is lost. It is unclear if the lack of geo-cultural context is intentional commentary on how colonialism views the continent of Africa as one general abyss, if it is meant to prove that all African sculptures are treated with the same bias in the West, or if the filmmakers saw no importance in including such information. Compare this to the 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* which also did not provide biographical information of the artworks. As discussed in the previous chapter, the omission of contextual information in that exhibition was intended to make the museum audience look at the African works as works of art. They were to be regarded for the form and finely crafted artistic qualities. In *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die] however, the anonymity of the sculptures is ominous. It begs the viewer to ask: Who made these statues? Why are they “dead” as the film’s title suggests? If they are



Fig. 14. Still from *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die]. Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, 1953. Available from YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed February 7, 2014).

dead, they must have once had a living identity. What happened to these identities? Who is responsible for their death?

Furthermore, it is unlikely that a filmmaker as esteemed as Marker would randomly place the African sculptures throughout the film. Why did he choose the order that he did? Was his temporal figuration based on aesthetics or on something more? The camera sits almost unwavering in front of the Bangwa figure, only showing her from the bust up (Fig. 14). A mixture of light and dark shadows fall across her and obscure the plain background. During the five seconds that the Bangwa figure is on screen, the narrator's voice speeds up, as does the background music as the voice says: "Nous voulons y voir de la souffrance, de la sérénité, de l'humour, quand nous n'en savons rien." [We want to see suffering, serenity, humor, when we know nothing.] The Bangwa figure is there and gone in a flash, but if you pause the film and look at her face, you can force yourself to see suffering or to see serenity or to see humor in her expression. Marker almost does not give the viewer enough time to digest his profound sentiment: The West imposes its own interpretation onto African art. If a museum tells you that the Bangwa figure is suffering, then we see pain in her face. If an academic tells you she is serene, then we see an angelic demeanor.

In both the photographic and film representations, the Bangwa figure is physically seen. Her image appears in print form or on the screen. There is no doubt that the representations are definitely of the Bangwa figure of this study. This is significant because they are in direct conversation with the figure and with her respective locale; they are responding to her and she becomes ingrained in them. For example, the photographs that Man Ray took probably would not have happened if the figure did not belong to Helena Rubinstein at the time, who was

acquainted with many Surrealist and Modernist artists. There are other instances in which the Bangwa figure's representation is not so clear. These allusions and appropriations possibly inspired by the figure are significant and function, as we will see, in similar and diverging ways to photographic and film representations.

Other Possible Appropriations

This section focuses on the speculated appropriations of the Bangwa figure, specifically Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" painting (1912) and Robert Brain's novel *Kolonialagent*. These speculations are meaningful in and of themselves as speculations. We must ask why we believe that Duchamp and Brain would appropriate the Bangwa figure. What qualities—formal, aesthetic, historical—make us want to believe that the figure inspired a painter and a writer? What do they reveal about the function of African artworks in the West?

Alisa LaGamma, Curator, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, argues that Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (Fig. 15) may be viewed as a "derivative" of the Bangwa figure (2009). While no one will ever know if Duchamp was inspired by the Bangwa figure or not, LaGamma's speculation is tempting to believe. Many of Duchamp's contemporaries, such as André Derain, Henri Matisse, Emil Nolde, Pablo Picasso, and Maurice de Vlaminck, were influenced by "traditional" African sculptures (Bassani 2005:375-94). Duchamp's *Nude* conveys a single figure in movement, just as the Bangwa sculpture does. LaGamma's argument focuses on this fact, that both artworks are physically static but convey motion. Both of the females depicted are caught in movement. The Bangwa

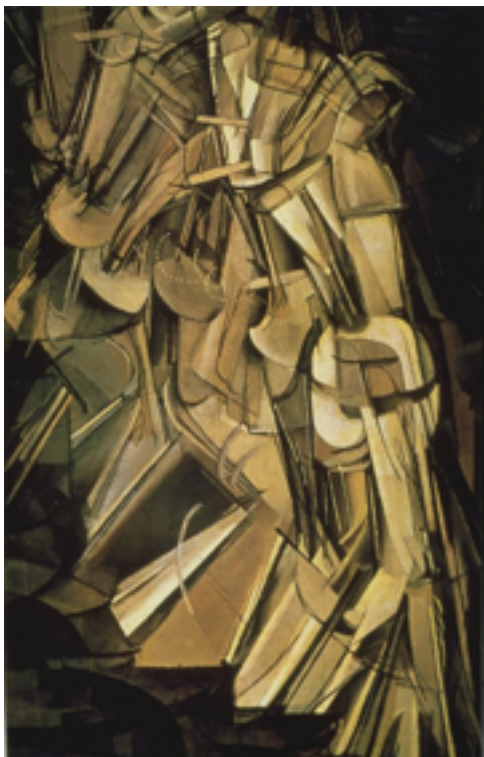


Fig. 15. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. 1912, oil on canvas, 58 x 35 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Available from: ARTstor, <http://artstor.org> (accessed April 14, 2014).



Fig. 16. Mirror image of female *lefem* figure, Bangwa, Grassfields region, Cameroon. Late 19th century, Wood, pigments, H. 85 cm. Musée Dapper, Paris. From: *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Alisa LaGamma, 2011. Figure 113.

figure bends her knees in dance and appears almost as if she is lurching forward. The nude bends her knees in her staircase descent.

The similarities do not end with the depiction of a female in motion. Duchamp's blocky form is reminiscent of the Bangwa figure. This parallel becomes even more apparent when the image of the Bangwa figure is flipped on its vertical axis (Fig. 16). Similarly, both the Bangwa figure and the nude have extremely angular arms and that in conjunction with the bent knees convey add to their dynamism. When viewed next to the Bangwa figure, Duchamp's *Nude* seems to have the same striking similarities. Therefore, while Duchamp never mentioned interacting with the Bangwa figure, the aesthetic qualities of the two artworks and their similar subject matter make LaGamma's comparison attractive. However, there is the question: Did Duchamp

ever see the Bangwa figure before painting *Nude*? She did not arrive in Paris until the second half of the 1920s, more than a decade after Duchamp painted *Nude*. However, it is not impossible that Duchamp at some point visited the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin when the figure was on view there. The Cubist form of *Nude* could also be inspired by another (or multiple other) African sculptures.

Another possible appropriation of the Bangwa figure appears in Robert Brain's fictional ethnography *Kolonialagent* (1977). Brain's narrative takes the form of Gustav Conrau's journal, the German colonial agent who was the first European to reach the Bangwa region and who brought the Bangwa figure back to Germany with him in 1898. In *Kolonialagent*, the fictive Conrau receives an old woman's "mother":

Focha was waiting with an old hag, who unwrapped the usual grotesque—but old and finely carved—statue of a dancing woman. It was about four feet high, with an elaborate headgear, anklets of cowries and a rattle in each hand—it reminded me immediately of the "mother of twins", the dancers who had performed yesterday at my boy's christening. Focha said that the woman had brought her "mother" to give to me and I said I would pay the usual price, since it was a fine specimen. [Brain 1977:91]

Despite a few obvious differences between Brain's reference and the actual sculpture—Conrau dies in the novel before bringing the sculpture back to Germany, and Brain's fictitious sculpture is over a foot taller and has additional cowries and a second rattle—Brain's sculpture is not all that detached from the "Queen" figure. It is impossible to imagine that Brain, an anthropologist specialized in the Bangwa region of Cameroon, would not be familiar with the "Queen" figure. In fact, she appears in his anthropological work "Bangwa Funerary Sculpture" which he wrote six years earlier (Brain and Pollock 1971:125). Secondly, Brain's inclusion of a second rattle could be interpreted as a speculation as to what the Bangwa "Queen" once held in

her missing left hand. As one of the leading scholars on Bangwa culture, he would be able make such a theorization.

Brain's description is significant in the way that it educates the reader about Bangwa culture. On the off chance that his reference is not directly inspired by the Bangwa "Queen" figure, it is at least a description of the same type of sculpture. Three qualifiers suggest that Brain's figure is also a *lefem njuindem* figure: (1) it is a statue of a "dancing woman", (2) it reminds the fictive Conrau of the "mother of twins", and (3) the woman who offers it to Conrau says that it is her "mother".³⁰ These qualifiers explain to the reader that *lefem* figures are carved after specific people who do specific dances for specific reasons. In effect, Brain's one paragraph about the sculpture is equivalent to the label text that would accompany a sculpture in a museum.

Textual interpretations of the figure work much in the same way as the film narration in *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die]. For *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die] and *Kolonialagent* the image or idea of a Bangwa *lefem* figure illustrates the story being told. There is a narrative—the story of African sculpture in the West and the story of a Western man in Africa, respectively—in which the Bangwa figure plays a role. Her function in both of these narratives is as a secondary character. She is almost part of the scenery as she works to set the stage and acts as a detail that adds to the overall picture. Indeed, she may almost go unnoticed in these two examples if she is not specifically being sought out. She is an individual that contributes to the whole; a single sign that creates meaning when paired with surrounding signifiers. In this way, both written and spoken text function to appropriate the figure into their overall respective narratives.

³⁰ See Chapter 1 for more on *lefem* and *njuindem* figures.

To complicate this analysis, consider written text that accompanies photographs or even the figure herself in a museum exhibition. Text such as this typically describes the figure, where she is from, perhaps her original function and her provenance. Instead of the Bangwa figure illustrating the text, the text is describing the figure. This distinction is important in understanding how meaning is constructed. When she is an illustration for a narrative, she takes on new meaning. She can be interpreted in the context of those specific stories. She becomes a character casted. In contrast, when the text is meant to describe her, then it is to be taken as fact. There is less room for interpretation by the audience.

In interpreting all representations and appropriations of the Bangwa figure, I recognize that she is not native to the Western world. However, she has become incorporated into Western culture through representations and appropriations, and it is the employment of these representations and appropriations that must be studied (Kopytoff 1986:67). Doing so reveals more about Western culture than about the Bangwa figure herself. The representations and appropriations reflect specific socio-historic trends and personal artistic modes of expression. Comparing different photographic representations of the figure reveals the varieties of ways in which the figure can be interpreted. In turn, how these photographs are used—as their own works of art, as inspiration for collecting or display, or as museum records—reflect how the figure herself is used in the Western context. She is at once part of these representations and separate from them. She appears in them even in contexts that have nothing to do with her or with Africa or with art, in the *Une nuit de Singapour* [One Night in Singapore] article for example. It is worth contemplating how a wooden sculpture from Cameroon has come to illustrate such articles and what that says about representation. In cases of appropriation and non-

direct representation, a new set of questions arises. Was the producer of a film, or author of a book, or painter of a picture inspired by the figure? Or was she used to illustrate an already conceived point? All of these questions and their accompanying appropriations and representations must be factored into the overall identity of the Bangwa figure. They add to this fragmented understanding of her by augmenting her already convoluted history. Representations and appropriations join with museum exhibitions to create her ever-accumulating meaning and function.

Conclusion

The meaning of the Bangwa figure in the West—in terms of social, cultural, and historical associations and definitions ascribed to her—has been imagined, re-imagined, constructed, and appropriated. This meaning making takes place in multiple zones, such as the museum space, private collections, auctions, photographic and film representations, and literary and artistic appropriations. Her tangible and physical configuration in these spaces can, in turn, influence her cultural meanings. For example, physically placing her in an American fine arts museum implies that she is considered to be an object of “art” by Western cultural standards. While the intention of putting her in a museum may be to educate about Cameroonian culture or to showcase her beauty or artistic form, the act also reveals that Western culture deems certain objects suitable for museum display. In this study, I have attempted to trace the Bangwa figure’s multiple meanings by tracing her physical location through time since she left the Cameroon Grassfields at the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. This trajectory in turn provides the opportunity to be aware of Western modes of meaning-making.

To begin, Gustav Conrau’s taking of the figure to Europe reveals that at that specific historical point in time (end of the nineteenth century), sculptures made in Cameroon were for some reason desired. This reason was at least partly tied to the European perception of such sculptures as ethnographic curiosities. The case of Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, further exemplifies this point that all things African were considered to be worthy of study or of visual scrutiny because of their novelty, foreignness, and the belief that they scientifically represented a past point on the evolution of human beings from uncivilized savage to civilized man.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the Bangwa figure began to be regarded as a work of art. Art dealers and collectors Arthur Speyer, Charles Ratton, and Helena Rubinstein owned the figure during this time. Furthermore, her status as an object of art was enhanced when she appeared in the landmark exhibition *African Negro Art* (1935) at the Museum of Modern Art. At this same time, she was photographed by Walker Evans for a portfolio of the exhibition objects to be distributed to historically black colleges in the South. This commission was perhaps influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, which began fifteen years earlier and influenced the way that African Americans looked to Africa for cultural heritage and inspiration. Man Ray also photographed the Bangwa figure at this time with a racially ambiguous nude model. This fervor of activity surrounding the sculpture can be attributed in part to a post-World War I fad of *l'art nègre* and the establishment of the academic field of “Africanism” by the Institut d’Ethnologie in France (Clifford 1988:59-61).

In 1953 Chris Marker and Alain Resnais created the film *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die] in which the Bangwa figure appeared. The film criticized colonialism and its effects on African cultures, especially on African artistic practices. Of course, the film was not approved for release until almost a decade later. The creation of this film and its initial censorship illustrates another point in Western history and its perception of other cultures. It should also be noted that Helena Rubinstein owned the Bangwa figure at the time this film was created and that she also owned the figure during the *African Negro Arts* exhibition (1935), when Man Ray photographed her (ca. 1934). Rubinstein therefore contributed to the figure’s exposure and to the meaning that accompanied these appearances. Rubinstein effectively allowed these three pivotal moments in the Bangwa figure’s Western career to occur.

After Rubinstein's death, the figure sold in 1966 for one of the highest prices ever fetched by a piece of African art. The sale shows that ownership of the Bangwa figure was desired and—at least monetarily—valued. Franklin and, after his death his daughter Valerie, often lent the figure to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She made appearances in other exhibitions throughout the 1970s and 1980s such as *African Sculpture* (1970), *The Art of Cameroon* (1984), and *Expressions of Cameroon Art* (1986). These exhibitions stated her geographic origins more explicitly than the *African Negro Art* exhibition (1935), which did not include object labels four decades earlier. From this, it is deducible that distinctions between different types of African art began to be favored in Western museums. Robert Brain published his fictional ethnography *Kolonialagent* around this time (1977), which included an allusion to the Bangwa figure. He wrote about her in her original context and about her sale to the German, Gustav Conrau. His narrative of the figure mirrors the tendency to explicitly state geographic origins in museums, in so far that both actions attempt to understand and represent the Bangwa figure's specific origins.

In 1990, Valerie Franklin sold much of her inherited collection of African art, including the Bangwa figure. Again she fetched an impressive, record-setting sum for an African art object. This time, the Bangwa figure moved back across the Atlantic Ocean to France to the collection of the Musée Dapper. After this point, she has appeared in exhibitions with themes other than the purely geographic. For instance, *Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique* [Women in the Arts of Africa] (2008) displayed African objects depicting females and their various roles in their respective cultures, and *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* (2011) focused on the arts of leaders in Africa. This shift to qualitative exhibition themes—in place of geographic themes—could be a Western attempt to gain new museum audiences and to look at these African art

objects from varying perspectives. Taking the two aforementioned exhibitions as an example, the Bangwa figure's meaning was reconsidered for her womanhood and for her role as a chief's wife or sister and therefore woman in power, respectively.

Since entering into the collection of the Musée Dapper in 1990, the figure has not often been lent for outside exhibitions. I speculate that this is either due to her age and consequential fragility or due to her perceived value. Perceived value can be broken into two categories: (1) monetary value and (2) cultural value. Monetary value could prohibit her from being lent to outside exhibitions because the insurance could be too expensive or the risk too high of damaging such an expensive investment with international travel. Culturally, she could be viewed as a rarity only to be taken out for special occasions. Interestingly, rare appearances are probably more similar to how she was originally intended to be used among the Bangwa, who only displayed her during certain ceremonies (Harter 1990). In response to not being able to acquire the figure herself, some exhibitions such as *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* (2011) and *Charles Ratton, l'invention des arts "primitifs"* [Charles Ratton, the Invention of "Primitive" Art] (2013) have used Walker Evans' or Man Ray's photographic representations of her. This signifies that she has accumulated a story or a meaning in the West that curators feel needs to be—and can be—told even in her absence. Her role is not exclusively tied to her presence but can be re-imagined through a representation of her.

Each of the Bangwa figure's appearances, non-appearances, representations, and appropriations is culturally and temporally tied to a point in Western history. She always functions within the context of her surroundings and yet is never devoid of her past. Each role she fulfills is contingent on her past events, her past interpretations, and on world history as well.

In terms of exhibition representations, Western museums have always been critiqued for their displays of non-Western cultures and will be until art and artifacts of non-Western cultures have been provided “sufficient opportunity” to be displayed (Karp and Lavine 1991:5).³¹ What is a museum to do if any display of non-Western art leads to controversy? Is it best to not display non-Western art? Of course, I do not believe that this is a solution. And as we have seen, not lending the Bangwa figure to exhibitions has caused some controversy as well. If controversy is inevitable, perhaps it is best to face it head-on rather than try to avoid it. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine call for three actions for the American museum world to take in order to work within and past this controversy:

(1) the strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; (2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and (3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken. [1991:6]

If I were to purpose an exhibition that includes the Bangwa figure, I would be able to consider the first and third proposed points but the second is beyond the control of a single exhibition. Let us therefore turn to the first and third guidelines in considering an exhibition of the Bangwa figure.

The first guideline, to give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums, would require either hiring a museum staff member of Bangwa origin or doing anthropological fieldwork among the Bangwa to collect direct advice from multiple informants. However, we must take into account the amount of time that has elapsed since the figure left Cameroon. Over one hundred years have passed since the making of this statue.

³¹ “Museums attempting to act responsibly in complex, multicultural environments are bound to find themselves enmeshed in controversy.”

Cultures constantly evolve and change, and, as noted in the first chapter, the most recent *lefem* statue representing the parent of twins or a special child was found in Bangwa in 1967, and only one single statue was found. Therefore, the practice of carving a *lefem* mother of twins may be a practice that does not even exist anymore. On the other hand, the advice of Karp and Lavine should not be ignored. Because an exhibition “often bears the burden of being representative of an entire group or region” (Karp and Lavine 1991:6), we must consider how a sculpture made so long ago is still perceived as being representative of the Cameroon Grassfields today. Working with populations to give them power over how they are represented would open discussion for how to properly display the historicity of the Bangwa figure. While this study has placed the Bangwa figure within a Western history, it would be interesting to view her within a Bangwa history. How did artistic styles change after colonial imposition? If *lefem* figures of mothers of twins are no longer created, is there another object that took their place, culturally? What types of histories are passed from generation to generation, and how does the current generation see itself as similar or different from those histories? These questions could hopefully be answered and then considered in the creation of an exhibition by including Grassfields people in the conversation.

Even if these histories are able to be fully told, an exhibition including the Bangwa figure cannot ignore her long history in the West. Karp and Lavine’s third guideline, to experiment with exhibition design to include multiple perspectives would be able to address this history as well. The multiple perspectives that surround the Bangwa figure could include: the Bangwa perspective; the perspective of Western artists influenced by African art; and the current Western museum perspective.

The Bangwa perspective would begin the exhibition in order to provide the visitor with the background knowledge necessary to understand the rest of the exhibition. This section would include the Bangwa figure herself, any existing earlier examples of *lefem* figures, and examples of Bangwa art following colonial imposition. This section may even feature a few pieces by contemporary artists that are influenced or inspired by past traditions. To follow the first guideline of giving populations the chance to exert control over the exhibition, video or sound recordings of Bangwa people explaining their known history would accompany this section.

The second section would encompass the perspective of the Modernist movement and the Harlem Renaissance. It would include the photographs of the Bangwa figure by Man Ray and Walker Evans and could also include other African pieces that have influenced Modernist artworks alongside those artworks. This section must be careful to make a clear distinction between Modernist works and those that arose from the Harlem Renaissance, as Modernism sometimes fetishized African objects and the Harlem Renaissance used African objects to give African Americans a sense of cultural heritage.

Ideally the third section, the current museum perspective, would address issues that a Western museum encounters in representing non-Western cultures. It would discuss the lack of knowledge surrounding the Bangwa figure, such as the name of the ancestress represented in the figure. This section would also make clear that colonial imposition is to blame for much of this lack of knowledge, that we only have the few notes written by Gustav Conrau. If possible, this section would display Conrau's notes or a replica of them. *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die] the film by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, would play to show critiques of colonialism. But this section, as the *grande finale* of the exhibition must not stop at problems of

colonialism. It must push itself and be open to controversy by being transparent about current issues a museum faces. This section would recognize that a viewer is expected to accept the authority of a museum and therefore challenge the viewer to reconsider how stories are told in a museum. A contemporary artist may be commissioned to make a new film, inspired by *Les statues meurent aussi* [Statues Also Die], that considers how culture is being manipulated in the present day. This is not meant to be pessimistic or nostalgic about a loss of culture but rather an understanding of realities and how cultures interact with each other and evolve.

Given her history among Western collectors and museums and her direct representation in photography of the 1930s, the Bangwa figure offers a convenient starting point for an exhibition such as this. She encompasses multiple meanings at one time, and therefore a multi-perspective exhibition would reveal this multiplicity to a museum audience. They would be able to deduce how meaning is constructed and interpreted and, in turn, interpret meaning themselves. By making explicit the construction of meaning in the West, the museum visitor would be encouraged to look introspectively at his or her own interpretation as well.

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