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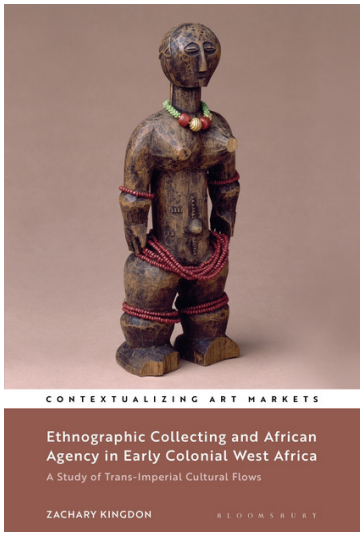
Book Review

Zachary Kingdon: *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa. A Study of Trans-Imperial Cultural Flows* (New York, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019)

by Julien Bondaz



This book by Zachary Kingdon is the first to be published in the "Contextualizing Art Markets" collection edited by Kathryn Brown for Bloomsbury. In her preface, Brown emphasises this inaugural function and points out that the notion of "market" is to be understood in the broad sense, which "encompasses a dynamic terrain of exchange, gift, barter and negotiation" (p. XXV). Not that this first volume should be read as a programmatic essay, of course; rather, it is to be viewed as a case study that may serve to disrupt the analytical routines of art history and the anthropology of art in their analysis of the production of the value of works.

Kingdon offers a thorough and extensively documented study of a specific moment in the history of ethnographic collections, when, during the second half of the nineteenth century, a new economic system based on palm oil plantations developed on the western coast of Africa. The city and port of Liverpool played a central role in this switch from the slave trade to agriculture and forestry. The constitution of the collections that formed the basis of the Derby Museum, and the history of that institution since its

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opening in 1853,[1] reflect the continuities and breaks between these two forms of extraction that were the slave trade and the palm oil trade. The activity of collecting natural and ethnographic objects proves to have been tightly bound up with these two extractive economies.[2]

One of the stimulating hypotheses adumbrated in the prologue concerns a correlation between the succession of those two economic models that were the slave trade and palm oil production and the successive modes of ethnographic collection, with the figure of the sailor-collector being partially replaced by that of the merchant-collector, often fully integrated into African coastal communities and therefore capable of gathering not only objects but also knowledge about those objects. The intensification of maritime trade with the African West Coast from the 1870s onwards also resulted in a densification of supply networks and a growth in the collections brought back to Liverpool. The idea being that these two phases of colonial exploitation were accompanied by two distinct paradigms of ethnographic collection. This hypothesis, which the author is quick to qualify, is founded more on the strategies of distinction and legitimisation employed by the protagonists themselves than on the existence of a real break between two different economic models. However, it does provide us with a framework for thinking about the ways in which the circulation of ethnographic collections and that of commodities were intermixed within the overall dynamics of nineteenth-century colonial projects. This requires that we pay close attention both to the interactions between local actors and to the putting in place of forms of transcultural collaboration and of trans-imperial networks. This twofold heuristic challenge is at the heart of the editorial project behind this collection, and it is fully addressed in Kingdon's book.

Chapter after chapter, the author undertakes the task of researching and establishing the African protagonists behind these collections, reconstructing their lives, which all too often have been obscured, and recognising their agency in the choices and practices of collecting. To this end he references both archive data chosen from the museum collection, which provide further detail, and data collected from the descendants of the actors themselves in 2009–10, mainly in Ghana and Sierra Leone, proving once again the importance of redoubling historical sources with investigations in the field when it comes to the history of the practices of collecting. The architectural heritage of Freetown is also the subject of some very interesting analyses, as the author looks to these buildings for clues to the way of life of African elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Of course, Kingdon does not seek to deny the scale of pillage and theft of objects, nor the recurring violence of colonial collecting. He does however emphasise the "imperial

1 The Derby Museum was renamed the Liverpool Free Public Museum after its change of location in 1860 and since 2005 has been known as the World Museum.

2 Although the second half of the nineteenth century also saw Liverpool become a hub of the market in live exotic animals, it is more the ethnographic collections that interest Kingdon. Nevertheless, he stresses the often-mixed nature of the collecting practices.

iconoclasm" that marked British colonial conquest (p. 26). He notes that "the military looting of Benin's royal altarpieces constitutes a prime example of African artefacts being acquired purely on European terms" (p. 29). Several of these pillaged objects were in fact purchased by the Derby Museum in the late 1890s from Doctor Felix Roth, who was involved in the conflicts, and his brother. But cases of negotiated gathering, as well as examples of gift-giving and exchanging objects, are sufficiently numerous for collecting to be seen as an activity of transcultural transfer and translation, one that at times was partially enacted on the terms of the colonised populations. By focusing on these other instances of collection, by revealing the "convoluted biographies" of the artefacts collected (p. 95) and the connections or strategies of African suppliers, his purpose is to criticise the way in which many historians of collecting have obscured the intentions of African players and thus to deconstruct the image of passivity that continues, albeit in most cases unconsciously, to be applied to them. If this idea is not totally new, such an approach, as Kingdon shows, does have the merit of forcing us to interrogate local social stratifications and the role of the Christianized elites in the activity of collecting, and also of introducing a gender-related perspective into the study of the logics of exchange and connection on trans-imperial mercantile networks. For example, the collections of medicinal root samples given by Ridyard to the Manchester Museum "reveal the practical and dynamic cultural agency that women exercised within Freetown's Krio communities" (p. 95). Another advantage of this approach is that it brings to light new information about some especially interesting corpuses of objects, such as the sculptures collected from two women donors in Sierra Leone, W. E. Johnson and B. Yorke, including a portrait of Queen Victoria, all in the same styles as the works produced in Lagos by the sculptor Thomas Ona Odulate.

The starting point of Kingdon's research is the figure of Arnold Ridyard (1851–1924), who spent some forty years working as an engineer on the boats of the African Steamship Company. In 1894 he started collecting objects for the museums of Liverpool and in other British towns, especially the Derby Museum. His first acquisitions were natural specimens, and in particular dozens of living fish for the Derby Museum aquarium. The author also takes an interest, however, in the many ethnographic objects that Ridyard collected after that, through an increasingly dense network of donors.[3] His first suppliers appear to have been Europeans based in the coastal ports, but as of 1898 he was also connected to "a complex, cosmopolitan social network of well-travelled African traders, celebrated Krio missionaries, highly educated West African professionals, and politically astute indigenous chiefs" (pp. 45–46). He thus developed a network of over two hundred contacts all along Africa's west coast, over half of whom were Africans, and most of them of the same confession – Methodist – as himself. According to Kingdon, his work of collecting and donating can be explained by the Methodist principles of "acquisitiveness and generosity" (p. 57). The extension of his "informal system of exchange" (p. 48)

3 Kingdon also presents the fascinating case of photographs donated by Frederick Lutterodt, a part-itinerant photographer based in Accra (p. 200–205). Ethnographic value was indeed attributed to some of these photographs when they entered the museum.

is therefore founded at once on colonial, commercial and religious logics. It embodies a "collaborative" (p. 273) form of collecting.

While Kingdon emphasises the role of traditional chiefs in several collecting operations, the majority of donors were local merchants and entrepreneurs. Consequently, collecting in the Gold Coast and, even more, in Sierra Leone, reflects the interregional trade in which these people were participants. Ridyard's contacts were usually based along coasts and rivers, although a number of donors were Muslims involved in the kola nut trade. This intertwining of collecting practices and commercial transactions explains Ridyard's interest in objects that speak of mobility, contact and circulation over long distances, such as a series of calabash drinking vessels, a pair of Swahili lavatory clogs from Zanzibar, and a canoe and paddle donated in 1873 by a Krio merchant called W. R. Renner. As Kingdon notes, "it would seem that Ridyard put together this assemblage partly in an attempt to encompass and communicate, in material form, the multifaceted panorama of connection and material flow that characterized his African voyaging experience" (66). The study of these collections also makes it possible to revisit the "Black Atlantic"[4] paradigm by focusing on inter-African networks of connection (76).

In Freetown we can observe the constitution of veritable diasporic collections: between 1900 and 1916 some fifty Sierra Leoneans (several of whom were descendants of freed slaves) gave Ridyard 242 ethnographic objects and 143 natural history items. The fact that the majority of donors had been merchants or entrepreneurs explains why it is that most of the ethnographic objects came from other coastal regions of West Africa, notably Nigeria and the Gold Coast. The intense and long-standing circulation of objects and styles is thus documented by these different collecting operations. This was one major difference with regard to the collections constituted on the Gold Coast, which was more linked to local groups, particularly the Asante. Kingdon thus distinguishes donors who took part in diasporic logics, which were strong in Sierra Leone, and "cosmopolitan patriots" in the Gold Coast.[5] The latter, indeed, were heavily involved with the colony's literary clubs and with the Gold Coast Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, which suggests that their gifts had a political, pan-African, even-anti-colonial motivation. In the case of these two colonies, however, the mobility of the donors was particularly great. The figure of Thomas John Williams, a Krio merchant and kola and cocoa planter in Sierra Leone, is especially revelatory. He and his sons gave Ridyard a number of objects, notably several fine Mende masks, and travelled in Europe, probably with his support, working to give a positive image of Africans. Actors and objects were in fact constantly travelling together.

The many nomadic objects collected by Ridyard therefore raise a twofold epistemological and museographic problem. Transcultural and often hybrid, they "seem to pose a

4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

5 He takes the notion of "cosmopolitan patriot" from Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cosmopolitan Patriots, in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 91-116.

problem for museums, because they fail to slot neatly into discrete ethnic and geographical compartments within the tabular classificatory systems that museums still routinely use to order and to structure access to the objects in their collections" (p. 92). Over the years, Ridyard himself reoriented his collecting principles, the object of his search going from spectacular pieces to everyday objects, which were deemed more representative. But, as Kingdon recalls in the last chapter of his book, it was above all after their entry into the museum that the collected objects underwent redefinition. In the course of the 20th century, the growing power of the ethnic paradigm in art history explains the fact that the artistic value of the objects should have been closely associated with forms of ethnic marking, whereas the collections assembled by Ridyard, which do not fit with the "later ideologies of cultural value and systems of commodification" (p. 248), were in contrast marginalised. Even so, it would have been well worth interrogating the ethnographic character of these collections in terms of value, from the same kind of constructivist perspective.

The great merit of this book, therefore, lies not only in its rich description of specific collecting situations, seen as forms of exchange that are more or less reciprocal, strategically connected to bigger, interregional and trans-imperial networks of circulation. It also prompts us to reflect on the conflictual production of the artistic and ethnographic value of objects, deriving from concrete collecting situations, by shifting the question of transactions from the commercial sphere to the cultural sphere. This kind of pragmatic approach to the anthropology of art is therefore possible only on the condition that the notion of the market is not reduced to the simple question of processes of commodification.

Julien Bondaz is Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 (France) and is a researcher in the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Enjeux Contemporains (LADEC) and the Centre Alexandre Koyré (EHESS-CNRS-MNHN, Paris).

Translation: Charles Penwarden