

## Does African pottery challenge the distinction between 'fine art' and 'decorative art'?

I have always been a pattern maker and surface patterns are an integral part of my ceramics work. My affinity to patterns has been stimulated by the highly decorated ceramics, textiles and other arts and crafts produced in Africa. When I was turned down for a place on a fine arts degree at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf as being "too decorative" I discovered that my appreciation of patterns and their 'decorative' qualities is not mirrored within the 'fine arts' establishment.

The term 'decorative' is loaded with negative connotations and is often used to imply art of inferior artistic value or simple "bad art". (Tyrrell, 2012) Even ceramic artist Paul Scott, known for his surface printed ceramics, seems to suggest in his book *Painted Clay* (2000) that a pure decoration, i.e. decoration for decoration sake, is a sign of inferiority: "I have also been careful to choose work where the drawn, painted or printed images are more than simply decorative. I have avoided illustrating works where the imagery or patterns on a piece are simply adornments. In short, I have selected works where the painting, drawing or printmaking are quintessential to the pieces' existence." (p.12) His view, however, is subjective and open to question: What cultural and educational frameworks form the basis of his to decide whether decorations are "quintessential" or merely "adornments"?

Most published voices on art come from within a value system based on Western European culture, which, within the hierarchy of general art history, places oil paintings at the very top end of the 'fine arts' and "ceramics as minor art, applied art or domestic decoration" further down. (Vincentelli, 2000. p.5) However, feminist readings link this evaluation of pottery within the hierarchy of arts to historical notions of class and gender stereotypes. Moira Vincentelli in *Women and Ceramics* (2000) argues that the 'decorative arts' traditionally were seen as pass-time activities for women of the middle and upper classes. The products of their 'hobbies' had little commercial value and were limited to 'prettifying' the domestic sphere. Thus, decoration was linked to the domestic environment and notions of femininity and "was seen as something which was additional to an object's 'real' purpose." (p.77-78)

Within this context, the commercial art-market and the academic discipline of art history, which are still globally dominated by Western European and American gendered values, are predisposed to undervaluing African pottery because pottery making in Africa has largely, with a few exceptions, been a

predominantly female occupation often producing highly decorative pots. Thus as Vincentelli suggests in *Women Potters* (2003) African pottery's main value and appreciation lies within archaeological and anthropological studies but has had very little appreciation outside of this context. (p.43)

Anthropological studies have placed a strong emphasis on 'reading' decorations and patterns, which are such an integral part of all African arts including textiles, pottery, metal work and body decorations such as scarification and body painting. Often specific patterns cross over from one medium to another produced by the same people. However, 'reading' a specific pattern is often not possible as their meanings aren't necessarily fixed or can get lost over time. (Frank, 2007, p.30) Nigel Barley in *Smashing Pots* (1994) points out that the desire for fixed meanings is not universal but a very Western-European one: "... in Western perspectives on African decoration, there is always a tendency for the researcher to establish a lexicon of word-like, named motifs, assume that the name of a motif is what even purely abstract pattern *really* represents and bestow a symbolic significance upon the represented object." (p.123) In our Western society we lay great value on fixed knowledge, and, as the saying goes, with knowledge comes power. In this case, academic knowledge of the meaning of patterns used in African arts imposes expertise and authority which helps to control their perceived value in the West.

However, in many cases the patterns used on African pottery will be of predominant practical value, i.e. a roughly patterned surface will improve a better grip, or a pattern will help to identify the owner of a pot after a communal firing, which is common in Africa. (Vincentelli, 2000, p.79 and Barley, 1994, p.128) There is often no practical necessity for the beauty and design in these patterns, except that their general appeal may increase their desirability and local market value. According to Scott such a pot is not art when the pot's existence is determined purely by its function – even though it may be decorated. This pottery gets 'elevated' when "objects...are more than just utilitarian vessels or decorative claddings, there are pieces, which tell a story or commemorate an event; objects that are desirable status symbols; political and aesthetic statements, pictures." (Scott, 2000, p.13) But what happens to a pot's value when the meaning of decoration remains obscure and only its function is accessible?

A serious obstacle to understanding historical African pottery is that pots often enter into international circulation with very little or no provenance and "vessels often are stripped prematurely of important aspects of their unique identities when they enter the market" which "leads to misattribution, with one ethnical label becoming a catch-all for pots exhibiting similar traits." (Bickford Bevzock, 2007, p.12) This, together with the question of whether the pots' decorations are

'authentic' or adapted towards the taste of a Western market, makes the interpretations of the 'meaning' of decorations even more problematic.

So, are the purely aesthetic qualities of a decorated pot good enough to make the pot 'worthy' of our appreciation? Certainly an understanding of the meaning of pattern can be helpful to put it into a historical or ethnological context and as such increase its international market value among lovers of ethnographic art. But do we need 'meaning' to decide a pot's artistic merit or can 'beauty' be defined independently of meaning? Barley poses the question: "It may seem absurd even to ask the question: 'Why are pots decorated?' It seems obvious to us that it must be that decorated pots are considered more beautiful than undecorated." (Barley, 1994, p.115)

In my opinion decorated and patterned pottery can be valued on its aesthetic merits alone and we could benefit from distancing ourselves from the values dictated by Western-European dominance of the contemporary ceramic art scene and establish a more inclusive and instinctive appreciation towards surface patterns and 'decorations'. Surely we can learn from "non-Western cultures [which] tend not...to differentiate between the decorative arts and the fine arts" (West, 1996, p.378) and extend this inclusive approach.

With this in mind, I will fully embrace decorative patternmaking when producing my new pots.

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