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Looting Africa

Theft, illicit sales, poverty and war are conspiring to rob a continent of its rich artistic heritage

BY AISHA LABI/NEW YORK AND SIMON ROBINSON/KAWU

The digging began early in 1995, after a farmer uncovered a sculpted terra-cotta head. For \$30, nearly twice what he made a month selling yams, he peddled it to a traveling antiquities dealer. Word of the windfall spread, and locals started tilling the ground around Kawu, 30 miles northeast of the Nigerian capital, Abuja. Within months, more than 2,000 diggers were burrowing into Kawu's stony earth. Dealers bid against one another, pushing up prices, in Kawu's version of the Gold Rush. Bars and brothels opened, and newly rich locals bought motorcycles. "Everybody was looking for money," says Abubakar Sala, the local primary school teacher, who headed to the fields after classes to try his luck and found two sculpted heads. "Farmers let their crops rot because they were too busy digging for terra-cotta."

Africa, its people already plundered by slavers, its animals by poachers and its mineral wealth by miners, is now yielding up its cultural heritage. Across the continent, artifacts are looted from museums, from universities and straight from the ground. Most of the objects--ancient terra-cotta and stone figures, brass and bronze sculptures, wooden grave markers, masks and doors--end up in the U.S. and Europe, where collectors prize such items as the 16th century Benin bronze castings whose technical finesse rivals works produced by Europeans of the same era. Among the most sought-after items are figurines from Kawu, with their distinctive triangular eyes and abstracted features, remnants of the Nok culture that flourished in central Nigeria from 500 B.C. to A.D. 200.

Nigeria has suffered the most looting. During the past two decades its museums have been robbed of hundreds of their most valuable items. In an infamous break-in at the National Museum in Ile-Ife in 1994, thieves with an inside contact smashed open 11 display cases. Their haul, which included some of the best-known 12th and 13th century Ife terra-cotta and brass heads--all uninsured--was worth about \$200 million. It was the museum's third burglary that year. Nigerian traders also target villages like Kawu, buying artifacts from locals or encouraging rudimentary digging. "It's not exactly excavation," says Abiye Ichaba, head of research and documentation at the Abuja Council for Arts and Culture. "There's nothing systematic about it, no pattern to it. We call it plundering."

Some governments have attempted to regulate or prevent the sale of antiquities. So has the International Commission of Museums, which publishes a Red List of African archaeological objects particularly at risk of looting. None have had much success. Interpol, the international police organization, estimates that the illicit trade in cultural property is worth \$4.5 billion a year worldwide, up from \$1 billion a decade ago. Africa accounts for 10% of this black market, and its share is growing. "It's a fantastically big problem," says Omotoso Eluyemi, director general at Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (N.C.M.M.).

Long tainted with the romance and condescension of the word primitive, African works have come to be valued for their intrinsic beauty and artistic merit. In the 1950s, both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art turned down an opportunity to acquire Nelson Rockefeller's extensive collection of non-European art, prompting Rockefeller to found the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City in 1954. By 1969 the Met had had a change of heart. In 1982 it opened its Rockefeller Wing, which absorbed the entire contents of the Museum of Primitive Art. Smaller galleries have echoed this trend. In September the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., will display a trove of 145 pieces donated by philanthropist Lawrence Gussman. Next year the exhibition will travel to the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian.

It is the West's growing enthusiasm for African objects that

has placed many of them in jeopardy. Most of Mali's archaeological sites, including graves built into the cliffs along the World Heritage-listed Bandiagara escarpment, have been looted. Ethiopia is struggling to protect its oldest silver Coptic Christian crosses and medieval manuscripts. Since 1970, illegal traders in Kenya and Tanzania have carted off hundreds of vigango, or Swahili wooden grave markers. When fighting erupted in the Somali capital of Mogadishu in 1991, one of the first casualties was the National Museum. Within weeks many of its prized exhibits, including ancient Egyptian pottery, were on sale to tourists in neighboring Kenya.

Tourists scoop up some of the illicit bargains, but the best artifacts are bought by dealers filling orders from Europe, the U.S. and South Africa. Using a letter from the N.C.M.M. permitting him to export contemporary arts and crafts--but not antiquities--Lagos dealer Chinedu Idezuna recently booked a crateful of works onto a flight to Amsterdam. "Customs officials check the shipment for narcotics, for this and that, but because I've got the letter, I'm fine," he says. "Our government doesn't permit it, of course, but we gallery owners get [objects] out by telling [customs officials] that we are having a show of African culture."

One catalyst for the booming trade is poverty. Villagers, many of whom have turned to Islam or Christianity and reject the idols of their forefathers, see no point in holding on to the artifacts when they can barely afford to feed their families. "Why do you think we sold them?" says schoolteacher Sala. "We need money."

Political unrest fuels the trade. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, as in Somalia, years of fighting have left many of the country's museums nearly empty. "For starving, unpaid soldiers, anything is good for sale," says George Abungu, chairman of the International Standing Committee on the Traffic in Illicit Antiquities. "Lack of order is a perfect breeding ground for people who want to collect art."

For Westerners, acquiring top-quality African art and artifacts has never been easier. The largest transit point for wholesale African art in the U.S. is New York City's Chelsea Mini-Storage facility, an enormous warehouse whose ground floor resembles an African bazaar. Hundreds of

traders, most from West Africa, have set up stalls, a makeshift mosque and a kitchen where women prepare traditional meals. Upstairs, Senegalese dealer Moussa Cissokho displays his wares. The presentation is modest--the figurines are still caked with soil, and the small space is crammed with crates--but the price is right. For a figure about a foot high that could, if it is a genuine Nok, command tens of thousands of dollars at a gallery, he quotes a bargain price of \$3,000. What you might call a steal.

The makeshift nature of Cissokho's showroom may contribute to the bargains he is able to offer, but similar deals can be found elsewhere. An online auction by the Howard S. Rose Gallery in Manhattan featured a number of Nok, including a "fine large-size sculptural terra-cotta, low-fire ceramic human head" with a minimum required bid of just \$2,300. A woman who answered the phone at the gallery insisted that the items were "certifiably genuine." When asked about Nigeria's prohibition on the export and sale of Nok, she replied, "Maybe they were here before this law was passed."

In all likelihood these items, like many African antiquities on the market today, are fake. Christopher Steiner, a professor at Connecticut College and the author of *African Art in Transit*, estimates that "90% of what's coming into the U.S. is replicas or tourist art that's being made to look old." The problem is so widespread that even Bryna Freyer, the Smithsonian's African-art curator, can't always spot a phony. "I'm not sure I'd know an authentic Bura piece from a fake," says Freyer, referring to 2nd century artifacts from Niger, "because there simply aren't any in this country legally."

In the softly lighted, temperature-controlled rooms of museums like the Met and the Louvre, antiquities are displayed with a respect uncommon in an African museum, where an exhibit may be dusty, unlabeled and all but forgotten. Moreover, the antiquities are safe. Frank Willett, a leading authority on Nigerian antiquities, has advised that disputed items in Western museums not be returned to Nigeria unless they can be properly protected. He compares the illicit-art trade to the drug trade. "The stimulus for all this, of course, comes from the West," he says. "If collectors and museums were not interested in acquiring these pieces,

there wouldn't be an illicit trade in them."

Some attempts to stem the traffic may be working.

Authorities in Mali have cut illegal exports 75% by enlisting villagers as informants. Mali is the only African country with which the U.S. has signed a bilateral treaty restricting the importation of cultural artifacts. In Nigeria, museums boss Eluyemi is talking with a group of illegal traders--who insist on being called vendors and have even formed a union--to work out "compensation" for the works they find to ensure that at least some objects remain in the country. The 1995 digging frenzy in Kawu slowed after six months, partly as a result of visits by police and cultural officials.

Idezuna, the Lagos dealer, has prepared to export four worn but beautiful Nok sculptures. They look fragile and dainty, their texture slightly granulated, as if built up by sand and glue. Idezuna paid \$450 for the lot and expects to make \$15,000 when he sells them to one of his European contacts, who will sell them for as much as \$30,000. "It concerns me that we are losing our cultural heritage," he says. "But I don't blame myself. If I had the money to collect them, I wouldn't sell them. But they are more protected in Europe. Here we are yet to know the value of what we have."

As long as they are valued elsewhere, Africa's remaining riches will continue their exodus. The rape of this treasure-filled continent is not over.