

## **Contrasting traditions in perceiving Congo artifacts: ethnography vs. folk, ethnic or fine art?**

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In the paper session *Folk art, ethnic art, fine art - categories and relations* during ICME 2001 in Barcelona, I presented a paper under the title "Contrasting traditions in perceiving Congo artifacts: ethnography vs. folk, ethnic or fine art?". The paper has since been thoroughly revised and will during early 2002 be available in *Folk*, the journal of the Danish Ethnographical Society ([vol 43, 2001](#)). The paper, "A Congo story from Oslo. Reflections on the absence of an exotic art market in Norway" presents the fact that decades of attempts in Norway to establish an ethnographic art market with objects from Africa or elsewhere has not met with much success. The article presents why relatively large collections from the Congo (mainly collected between 1885 and 1918) has ended up in Norway and how these collections have been put into use. The interesting situation is that there are no significant private collectors of exotic art. There are today no galleries in the capital advertising African art. You will not find persons in galleries, university departments or in museums presenting themselves primarily as experts on African or Congolese art. The university institutes for art history have hardly shown any interest in exotic art. Collections from the Congo and elsewhere in the non-European world has mainly ended up in one of the few ethnographic collections in the country. Exhibitions in such museums have presented Congolese artifacts in context and not as art. In the bookshop of the Ethnographic Museum of Oslo you will not find any Congo art book for sale. No major exotic art book on objects have ever been published in Norway. It is as if this form of art did not come to us as it did elsewhere in Europe and North America when the commodification of ethnographica as art started to take hold in the 1920s to 30s. The boom of the 1970s certainly never spread to our part of the world. This lack of an exotic art market also means that Norway has been spared for a range of highly problematic issues arising from the commercial trade in art and ethnographica. In the essay I discuss what it can take to make the transition from ethnographic "traditional" object where its value is linked to a ritual or social contexts, to the "modernist" sphere of value both as an objet d'art and at the same time as a major financial asset. The article discusses various factors that may contribute to an explanation as to why ethnographic objects did not become commodities in a country like Norway.

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