

Is Authenticity Authentic?

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Are questions about authenticity authentic? The question of whether a piece of art is authentic is often raised when critiquing artwork. Originally the question of authenticity came from Linda Nochlin out of a concern for the use of art as an instrument of oppression by imperialist powers. It is important for people to question their own motives about the art that they are creating. However, the word authenticity is over-used, over simplified and stifling. Questions about authenticity becomes an impediment to creativity when artists are prevented from borrowing ideas from other artists, or cultures, and from carrying on conversations about their art. I will first define authenticity. Then I will review the origin of the concept of authenticity and the problems it was trying to address. I will then show some of the problems of using a too rigid application of authenticity.

Reaching back into history, in 1896 Leo Tolstoy wrote in his book, *What is Art?* that, artwork is only authentic when an artwork expresses the authentic values of its maker, especially when, those values are shared by the artist's immediate community. He defined inauthentic work as falsely sentimental and manipulative; while sincerely expressive art, embodies an element of personal commitment (Tolstoy). But where one ends and the other begins is almost impossible to discern.

Joel Rudinow in his article, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White Men Sing the Blues?" wrote, "Authenticity is a value, a species of the genus credibility. It is the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source" (Rudinow 1994).

Dennis Dutton in his Article, "Authenticity in Art" agrees with Tolstoy when he states that [authentic] artwork is a "manifestation of both individual and collective values." He goes on

to say however, that it needs a tradition and community that it comes out of. Authenticity is a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what aspect of it that we are discussing. A forged painting, for example, will not be inauthentic in every respect: a Han van Meegeren forgery of a Vermeer is at one and the same time both a fake Vermeer and an authentic van Meegeren” (Dutton 2003). Dutton defines two types of authenticity; nominal, or provenance, and expressive. We will only deal with the expressive authenticity in this paper.

Expressive authenticity is much more difficult to define as it is imbued with numerous disputable judgments. These judgments depend on many things such as the viewpoint of the person asking the question, as well as the knowledge and interest of the audience for the art (Dutton 2003). For instance if a culture produced a religious icon and used it for themselves, that would be authentic as it comes from within the artist to create it and is used by people who understand the feelings around the icon. However if a different icon is created that is sort of like the religious object but is meant for sale for tourists who have no clear understanding of the religious iconography, that would be inauthentic both for the creator of the art and for the viewer of the art (Dutton 2003). However, if the tourist was to create a world of meaning around that piece of art it feels authentic to the tourist. Taking this a bit farther however, hoarders are known to give meaning to each of the objects they own, making their space authentic to themselves. As you can see there is a slippery slope out of reality with this question of expressive authenticity.

Each art movement in history leads to another as each artist takes what comes before and changes it to their own needs. For instance, Impressionist and Post Impressionist art used Japanese woodblocks to inform their paintings. Could Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque have created cubism without the influence of the African masks that they bought? While Braque acknowledged the influence of African masks in his art, Picasso did not. The chances of Picasso and Braque offending Africans by the use of their masks was slight. By this time most masks for

sale were forgeries, and/or made for tourists. This was not generally spoken about at the time, according to Jose Francisco Ortega Violeta, a collector and art dealer in African masks (Viota. n.d.).

To understand the history of the word, authenticity we must go back to 1978 when Edward Said wrote his groundbreaking book, *The Orientalist*. He said that when people from ruling/Western countries study the East, their scholarship is suspect because the colonizers kept the Eastern countries subjugated and under-confident. Said goes on to say, “It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. Some of the immediate sting will be taken out of these labels if we recall additionally that human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with “other” cultures (Said, 204). Said’s book was an important because it made people stop and think about the way that dominant cultures treated colonized countries. It was an essential step to understanding power relationships. While Said was not writing about art, he unwittingly set the stage for the question of authenticity in Oriental art that was produced by Western artists.

While Edward Said did not discuss art or artists in his book, deconstructionists began examining colonialism in art. Jean-Leon Gerome, a prolific academy-trained artist who specialized in genre scenes, painted *The Snake Charmer*. By the 1850s he had shifted from idealism to objectivism. From 1853 to 1883 he made numerous trips to Egypt, Turkey and the Middle East engaging himself in drawing and photographing these countries extensively. He also bought clothing and artifacts for use in recreating scenes for painting later in his studio (Davies 223).

The Snake Charmer became the poster child for bad Orientalist paintings after art historian and writer, Linda Nochlin critiqued it in her article, "Imagining the Orient." She was appalled by the way the painting shows the licentious portrayal of the audience in the painting (Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient* 1989). The painting fits Said's definition of colonialist or Orientalist because Gerome never showed Western children or men in such a bad light sexually. But Nochlin goes on to criticize the beautifully painted, blue, 600 year old wall, with its, detailed details, and broken tiles. She points out that these details portray the Arab world as lazy or incompetent to conserve their own heritage (Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient* 1989). In Gerome's defense he spent a lot of time in the Middle East and he claimed to paint what he saw, suggesting that he could have witnessed this scene.

Nochlin's article also expressed a disdain for the picturesque. Nochlin says that, "the function of the picturesque-Orientalizing - is to certify that the people encapsulated by it, defined by its presence, are irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior to those who construct and consume the picturesque product. They are irrevocably, "Other." She also points out that the same society that was engaged in wiping out local customs and traditional practices was also avid to preserve them in the form of verbal records, in travel accounts or archival materials, the recording of folk songs, in the study of dialects or folk tales, and [Orientalist] paintings (Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient*). Societies are made up a variety of people though; some are trying to wipe out local customs while other people are trying to save them. They are not necessarily the same people.

Nochlin suggests that picturesque paintings Orientalize the subject, making it timeless, by the use of dramatic angles, and high contrasts of light and shadow (Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient* 1989). But of course; high contrast lighting, and dramatic placement of people, and animals enhance paintings. In a hot desert area the sun beats down very hard creating these same

contrasts. What artist of any repute would paint a landscape without considering lighting and drama? The picturesque is used in both Oriental and Western landscapes so I find this argument holds very little weight.

Nochlin had many interesting points to make in her article, but in the end she dismissed all of the Orientalist painters as being too realistic, and called realism bad art. The result of her stand against Orientalist paintings was that in ensuing years, museum curators removed much of the Orientalist art from the museum walls and put them in archives (Davies 2005). Neither Linda Nochlin nor Edward Said used the word, authenticity, in their work. However, both were focusing on what right a person has to do the work or art that they want to do.

Not everyone shares Nochlin's dislike of the Orientalist paintings. In fact art collectors in the Middle East and other Oriental countries bought Orientalist art for its beauty and didn't worry about the inconsistencies or flaws in the details. The Qatar Museum Authority wrote in their catalogue of Orientalist art, "Orientalist artists left a very important legacy of historically accurate illustrations of all aspects of the Ottoman life, culture and history. Harmoniously combining in their representations a simplified urban life and an ancient grandeur they presented a veritable gallery of great personalities and historical visual records, documenting their experiences of extraordinary encounters with the inhabitants of the world of the Ottomans" (Qatar Museums Authority). In fact, without the Orientalist painters little of the Orientalist countries would have had much visual history recorded at all.

Moving through the years we come to Dennis Dutton who wrote "Authenticity in Art" in 2005. Dutton says that in philosophy an authentic life is one in which there is "critical and independent sovereignty over one's choices and values" (Dutton). He says that artists should not ape someone else's music or art or follow a genre. Instead the art should be original to the creator. Dutton contends that artwork is a "manifestation of both individual and collective

values.” Therefore it needs a tradition and community that it comes out of. However, no matter what community an artist emerges from, there are always artists who are the anomaly in the community who do work that is unique, different or veering from the established norms and traditions (Dutton 2003).

Dutton finds Expressive Authenticity problematic. After all, who decides what is authentic; the artist, the viewer, or the critic? Leontyne Price certainly chose to leave the traditionally African American music of Blues, Jazz, and Rhythm and Blues to become an opera singer. Does this mean that she was inauthentic to the African American tradition or authentic because she went into a field that she felt pulled towards?

In a different angle on authenticity, Abayomi Barber, the founder of the Barber School of art, is opposed to Western stereotypes that link African identity and authenticity to what he calls the grotesque, weird and crudely rendered art that is readily available across the continent. Barber and his adherents have established a movement that features pictorial naturalism, magical symbolism and ethereal conceptualization. In the Barber School, artists depict realistic African subject matter, themes, portraits and landscapes — particularly of the Yoruba people. While the Barber School has been successful among Nigerians, these artists were not perceived as “authentically African” by Western authors and critics (Freeborn). Herein lies another problem in that as more and more indigenous tribal people move into the cities and create their art to sell, that previously had a different purpose, such as religious ritual, is the art still authentic? What if they teach their art to people not of their own tribe, is it still authentic art?

Africa's modern artists have attempted to distance themselves from their traditional art forms - just as Western artists do. Distance from the past in the modern Western tradition meant breaking away from the representational and towards abstract art. Distance from the past in the African context however, meant moving away from the stylized and symbolic abstracted art and

towards the representational. Then there are Africans who painted in the modern representational style in the past but now advocate rejection of Western influences and the return to traditional art (Freeborn). So what exactly is authentic art to the African community?

While I was at the Jaipur Art Festival I thought I would surely find one artist to interview about authenticity. I did not find a single artist or administrator who was interested in this discussion. Inevitably each one said that authenticity was not of interest to them but globalization and the exchange of ideas was. Most of the people I talked with did not know of Edward Said, those who did looked at me with bored, glazed over eyes and said things like, “I like globalism and the exchange of ideas.”¹ I received a typical response from a friend and colleague, Kishore Singh, Program Officer of Jarwahal Kala Kendra, the premier art institute of Rajasthan (Singh 2014). While I knew he had read Edward Said's book and understood the topic of authenticity, his answer in asking for an interview was that he was more interested in how to get American artists to come to India to paint and exchange ideas with students and professional artists.²

This led me back to the discussion that I had with Sara di Donato when she came to speak at Kendall. She had come to the studios to critique graduate student work. She did not seem to think that I was being authentic for creating art about my Indian experiences and told me that I should paint in Holland, Michigan where I happen to live.³ I then started wondering how she reconciled the fact that she was an Italian who was painting in the US with being authentic. Or

¹ I talked with Suresh Nair, painting faculty at Benares Hindu University and well known Indian artist; Dr. Madhukar Gupta, Divisional Commissioner of Jaipur, which is a very high governmental position, and married to Kiran Sonia Gupta the founder and organizer of the Jaipur Art Festival; Sunil Kumar, famous Indian artist; Ignacio Castillio, international artist from Santiago, Chile; Han Li, an interior decorating faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University in Doha, Qatar, and others whose names I have forgotten.

² Culturally, Indians consider it rude to answer "No" to any question but instead their eyes will wander away, speech slows and they switch topics. Or, as in the case of Madhurkar Gupta they will agree to do an interview, but just not do it.

³ Since I did not grow up in Holland, do not participate in the dominant church denomination, am not Dutch and did not send my children to the Christian reformed schools, and I am a card carrying pro choice Democrat, I am considered a pariah in this provincial town where I moved thirty years ago. Consequently, I rarely pay tribute to this lovely area by painting it and I am usually plotting to escape it. In 2008 while travelling extensively, I pronounced myself a world citizen and quit feeling like an outsider.

did the idea of authenticity have to do with the idea that artists from developed countries should not paint in developing countries as that would be too colonial. I wondered if in her mind it would be okay for artists from developed countries to paint in other developed countries. I called her for an interview, but she did not return my call or the email with these questions on them. Perhaps the reason artists do not want to paint in India is because they think that it would be inauthentic. But how would it feel to an Indian like Kishore Singh to be unable to get good Western artists to come to his art center? Might he feel not feel ostracized?

However, as Dutton points out, while some art is valued for its aesthetics, the audience of art generally wants to know more about the art, its place in history, the artist's background, and its cultural background to better understand the meaning and identity of a piece of art. Knowing the background of an artist and where the art is from and how it fits into the world culture is a fascinating topic of authenticity. The question needs its own context however as to why it is being asked, what is the viewers' definition of the word authenticity? If an artist wants to paint in another country, must an indigenous artist adopt them so that they are given authenticity? This was the path taken by Jordan Fenton, who spent fifteen months in Calabar, Nigeria, researching the art, rituals and performances of six masquerade societies. In the process he was initiated into each, adopted as a son by a local king, conferred with the rank of chief and honored with lengthy apprenticeships into an imaged and performed esoteric knowledge system (Fulbright Scholar Fenton to Discuss Masquerade Culture April 11 at Ferris 2013). While this seemingly gives him the brand of authentic, is this the only way to become authentic? What if no one wants to adopt you, or it is not the tradition in the country where you are interested in doing your art?

As we discovered by looking at various African artists, there is no clear-cut answer to which artist would be authentic enough to grant that right either. The idea becomes ludicrous as we start wondering why an artist must ask permission to do art from someone else at all. If what

is in the artist's heart is not authentic enough, then how can someone else decide what that artist should create? How will artists grow if they cannot simply paint what feels real, right, and authentic to them, regardless of how it feels to someone else?

The Blues is an interesting musical genre in which to examine this very idea. Originally the Blues was an autonomous music that had been impossible for outsiders to participate in its creation, or even its appreciation. The Blues developed its own new meanings for words, drew on religious rituals that were foreign to white people and pulled on the social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of black people in a racist, segregated America. According to Amiri Baraka, a controversial poet and writer, the idea of a white blues singer seems to be an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a black, middle-class blues singer. To Baraka an understanding of the blues was not available to white Americans, even if they were interested (A. Baraka 1999).

However, Joel Rudinow points out that "The access that most contemporary black Americans have to the experience of slavery or sharecropping or life on the Mississippi delta during the twenties and thirties is every bit as remote, and indirect as that of any white would-be blues player. . . Does mere membership in an ethnic group confer special access to the lived experience of ancestors and other former members?"

Rudinow then asks, "Who owns the blues and who has the right to play the blues and benefit from it, interpret it, use it as a performance style, draw from it and to contribute to it as a fund of artistic and cultural wealth?" (Rudinow) It is a fascinating question since, in this case, the question of authenticity hinges on whether we are hurting other cultures by appropriating their art. But can a culture keep their art only to themselves or will it stagnate if it is not changed by outside influences? Rudinow goes on to ask who are the legitimate cultural and artistic heirs and conservators to the blues as the founders and originators die-off? (Rudinow) The history of

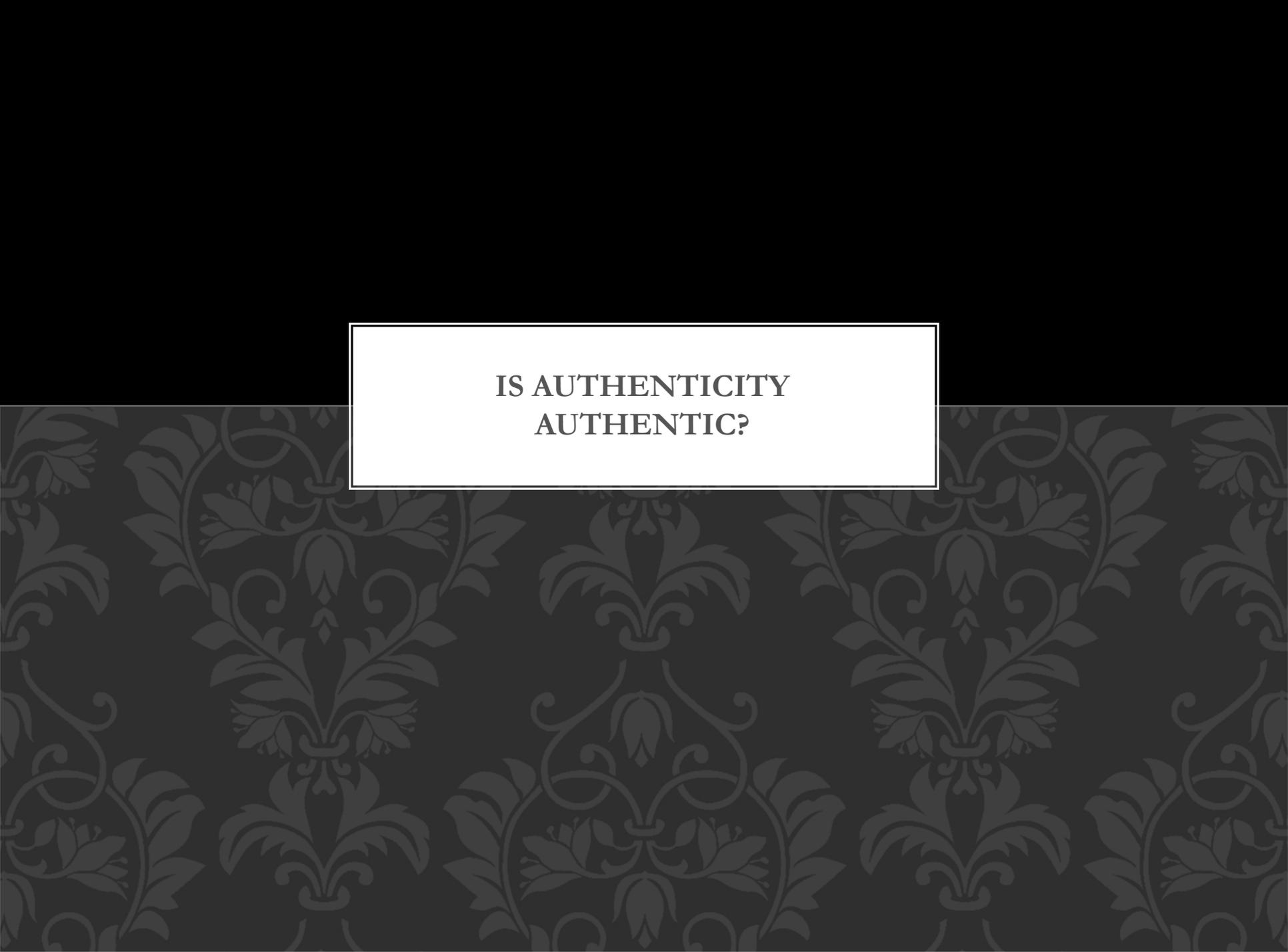
music and art provides ample evidence for accepting such borrowings as legitimate forms of tribute and trade in ideas. Legally, intellectual property covers an artist's own original creative work such as composition but not musical ideas such as elements of style." However, an individual may sell or give away their rights. Intellectual property is only given to individuals, not communities or cultures (Rudinow).

Rudinow concludes that "the authenticity of a blues performance turns not on the ethnicity of the performer but on the degree of mastery of the idiom and the integrity of the performer's use of the idiom in performance... what one is looking for is evidence in and around the performance, of the performer's recognition and acknowledgement of indebtedness to sources of inspiration and technique" (Rudinow). While Rudinow was not referring to the visual arts, Picasso did not acknowledge his indebtedness to African art while Braque did. Does this make Picasso's art any more or less authentic than Braque's or does it just make Picasso more arrogant? This leads us back to the beginning where we discussed imperialism and colonialism. While both Picasso and Braque were raised in a colonial racist time period, one was able to cross a figurative bridge to acknowledge the value of the abstract African art in his own creations, while the other did not.

In conclusion I think that after reviewing various definitions of authenticity, and the history of colonialism and various writers' ideas on the subject we have answered the question about whether questions about authenticity are authentic. Art is wittingly and unwittingly used to define other people and countries in harmful ways. However, it is impossible for someone to judge whether someone else's art is authentic or not. Only the artist can decide this question. Artists have always used ideas from others to generate new ideas and ways of looking at things. A too rigid adoption of an authenticity standard stagnates art rather than enhancing it.

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**IS AUTHENTICITY
AUTHENTIC?**

WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?



"What a misrepresentation. In reality the place is heaving with tourists."

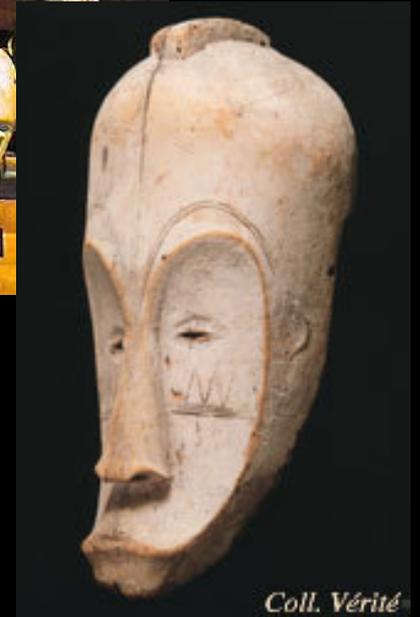
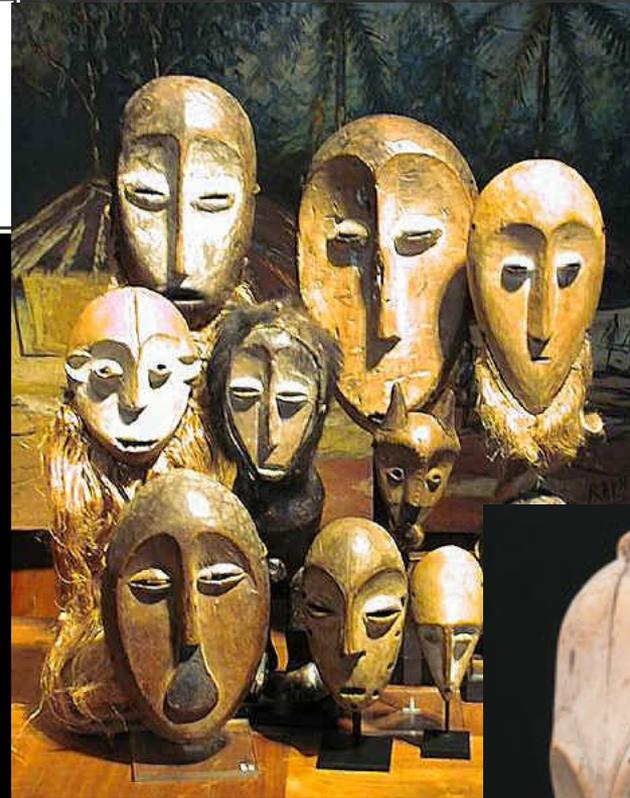
VAN MEERGEREN FRANS HALS



EXPRESSIVE AUTHENTICITY



CUBISM AND AFRICAN MASKS



Artwork is a manifestation of both individual and collective values. –
Dennis Dutton

THE PROBLEM ACCORDING TO
EDWARD SAID, IN HIS BOOK THE
ORIENTALIST

“It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.



**JEAN-LEON GEROME- THE SNAKE
CHARMER**

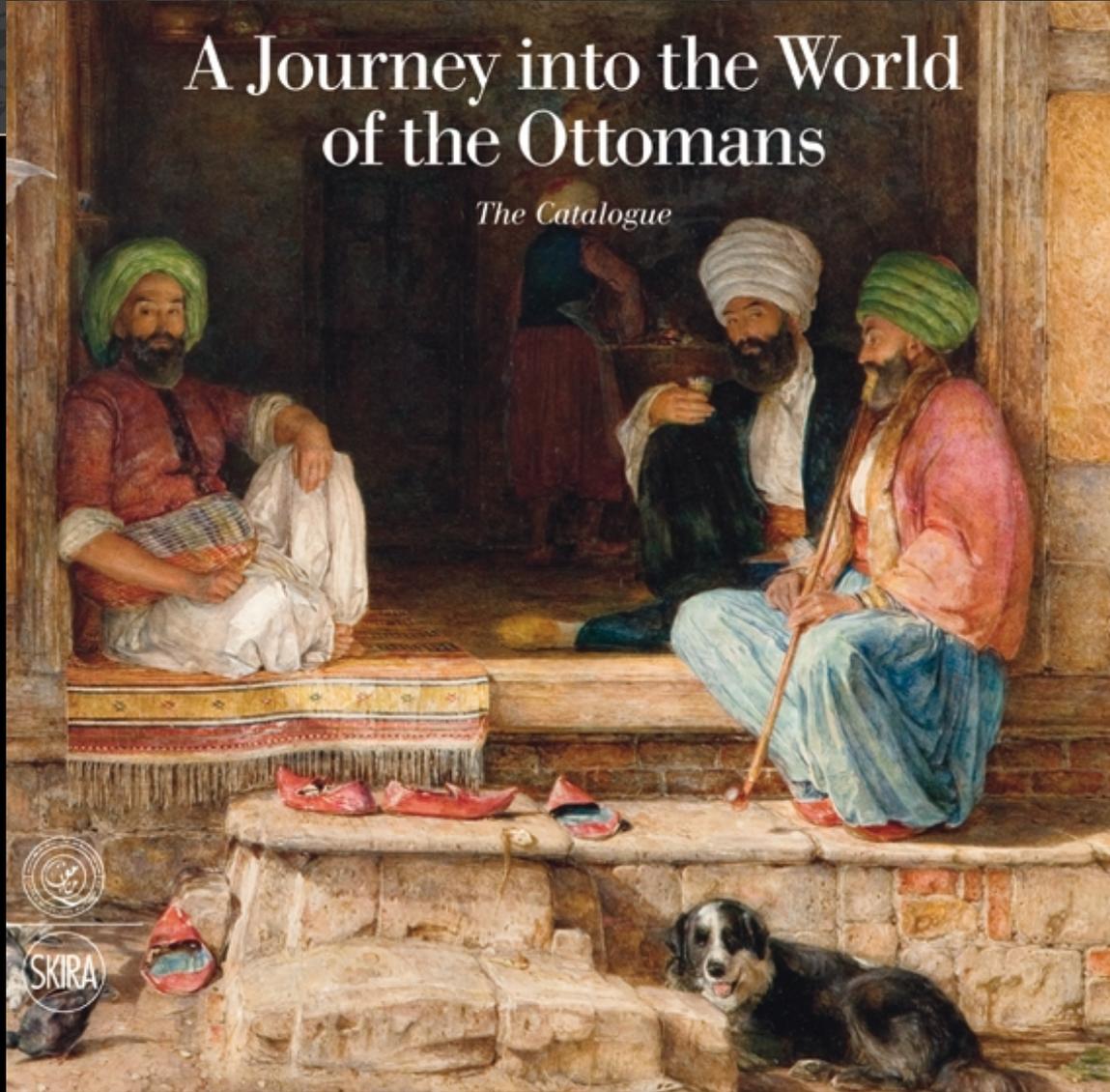


A STREET SCENE, DAMASCUS BY GUSTAV BAUERNFIND



A Journey into the World of the Ottomans

The Catalogue



SKIRA

**LEONTYNE PRICE- OPERA
SINGER**



ABAYOMI BARBER SCHOOL OF ART



This



Not this

SAMUEL AJOBIEWE-CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCE (2009) PASTEL



200 ARTISTS AT THE JAIPUR ART FESTIVAL



JORDAN FENTON SPENT 15 MONTHS IN CALABAR, WHERE HE RESEARCHED THE ART, RITUALS AND PERFORMANCES OF SIX MASQUERADE SOCIETIES AND ALSO WAS INITIATED INTO EACH, ADOPTED AS A SON BY A LOCAL KING, CONFERRED WITH THE RANK OF CHIEF AND HONORED WITH LENGTHY APPRENTICESHIPS INTO AN IMAGED AND PERFORMED ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM.



MA RAINEY AND THE STOKES
TROUPE 1912



SHARE CROPPERS



Black Share Croppers



White Share Croppers

IT GOT TO THE POINT WHERE I WAS
MAKING MY LIVING AT WHITE CLUBS AND
HAVING MY FUN AT THE OTHER PLACES. ~
STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN- BLUES SINGER



BESSIE SMITH



JOHNNY OTIS BAND



Sandra Hansen- Emmett Till Memorial Triptych

