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Scotland and the Arts of Africa

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I: Foreword

Walking into the McManus Gallery's Albert Hall, you are greeted by *Dundee and the World*. Some displays are composed of an amalgamation of curious objects; masks from every non-Western corner of the earth gather round and stare coldly through the glass. Behind another case is a group of more author-less figures sitting anxiously on their stands. Cradling these objects are four walls lined floor to ceiling with Scottish oil-paintings. You are reminded that if not for Empire, these objects would not be sitting motionless in their glass cages.

The basic structure for the essay that follows is a close look at an object which is not currently on display; a *sasabonsam* wooden figure by renowned Asante carver Osei Bonsu [Fig. 1].¹ I will spend the first part of this essay providing some background on Asante Art, Osei Bonsu, and the creature of *sasabonsam*. Then, I will move to present a brief theory of the object's provenance, the object's purpose, and where exactly other similar works by Bonsu have ended up on display. Additionally, I will discuss in some detail the tourist market for this sort of figure, and why renditions of this figure can be found in museums across Britain. After discussing these findings, I will grapple with the question: *Why* exactly is Bonsu's *Sasabonsam* not on display? As it turns out, there is indeed a short answer: The original curator for the African gallery thought that Bonsu's figure was "Too modern."² Ultimately, the question of the figure's modern status will come up against a broader question regarding the overall status of "tourist" art, and

¹ Osei Bonsu, *Sasabonsam (figure of a monster)*, wood carving, 1930's.

² This quote is taken from a brief conversation with the current curator of *Dundee and the World*.

whether or not it is (or should be) distinct from modern art. By the end of this essay, I hope to shed some light on the problems *Sasabonsam* poses for the current status of the African objects on display in Albert Hall.

II: *Introduction: Asante Art, Osei Bonsu, and Sasabonsam*

The art of the Asante features a strong legacy of woodcarving. Asante woodcarvers, who are always male, typically go through a long, expensive apprenticeship in order to gain respect for their craft.³ Carvers are not seen as being innately endowed with artistry, meaning any man has the capacity to become a master carver.⁴ Woodcarving tools, whether or not they are used for carving the mundane, royal, or religious, are all subject to the same spiritualistic cleansing before carving begins.⁵ Moreover, most manifestations of woodcarvings feature inclusions of symbols depicting common Asante proverbs. As such, although artistic objects can be discerned given their purpose, a common thread of spiritualistic importance binds woodcarvings together regardless of the to-be object's status.⁶

Osei Bonsu's life, spanning from 1900 to 1977, oversaw a time of Ghanaian history that allowed him to oversee and intimately interact with both colonial rule and the country's independence. Born in 1900 to notable Asante carver and drummer, Kwaku Bempah, Bonsu practiced under his father's instruction from a young age. A precocious student, Bonsu tackled commissions of royal regalia during his teenage years.⁷ His character, from descriptions of interviews, seems particularly witty; multiple accounts describe Bonsu as a perfectionist who often spoke proverbially with Asante sayings.⁸ Throughout his career as a carver, Bonsu engaged in what can be described as tourist commissions (although unlike the usual tourist commission, it seems there was no middleman initiating transaction) as well as by rulers of the Asante people, including three Asantehenes.⁹ Notably, Bonsu was commissioned by Robert S. Rattray, a Scottish

³Harry R. Silver. "The Culture of Carving and the Carving of Culture: Content and Context in Artisan Status among the Ashanti." *American Ethnologist* 7, no. 3 (1980): pg. 433

⁴*Ibid* pg. 436

⁵ Janet Adwoa. Antiri "Akan Combs." *African Arts* 8, no. 1 (1974): 32–35.

⁶ "Akan Wood Sculpture." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 91, no. 1/4 (2017): pg. 87-88

⁷ Doran H. Ross, "The Art of Osei Bonsu." *African Arts* 17, no. 2 (1984): 29

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 39

⁹ Bennetta Jules-Rosette. Image Creators and Image Consumers in *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*, Plenum Press, New York, 1984, pp.15-19 ; Ross pg. 29

anthropologist who worked under the British Empire in Kumasi.¹⁰ Rattray's commissions for Bonsu were numerous, potentially exceeding over one hundred *ntan*, or "popular band" figurines of drummer groups which were prevalent at time of commission.¹¹ After receiving commissions from Rattray, other 'tourists' (really, other colonial officers) began to employ Bonsu. The latter part of Bonsu's career was spent as a professor at multiple Ghanaian art institutions. During the final years of his career, Bonsu twice toured the US, the first time in partnership with the Smithsonian, and the latter visiting other intellectual, artistic institutions to showcase his woodcarvings.¹²

Between Bonsu's impressive string of commissions, his work as a professor at multiple institutions, and being invited to exhibit his work in parts of the Western sphere, there is little doubt that Bonsu was an innovative artist who critically engaged with changing nature of his environment. I will later return to this notion that Bonsu was indeed a critical artist to better assess the reasons for the McManus's lack of display for his Sasabonsam, as well to discuss complications this poses for the categorization of his art as tourist or modern.

Regarding the figuration of sasabonsam, Bonsu claims to have been the first to depict the creature in a physical representation.¹³ Bonsu's claim, however, is worded in such a way that makes it somewhat unclear as to whether or not he's claiming ownership of idea of Sasabonsam altogether. But, further evidence points to the creature being a part of Ghanaian folklore long before Bonsu's initial depiction of in 1925 on a chieftain's linguist staff like the one seen on the sword hilt currently on display at UCLA [Fig. 2].¹⁴ Literature of sasabonsam's mythology is somewhat varied, but most sources write of the creature being a devilish spirit which lurks in the bush at the edge of villages, awaiting to terrorize any person who wanders into its domain.¹⁵ Interestingly, although sasabonsam is a figure a part of Asante mythology which seems to predate contact with Christian missionaries, the form of the creature has adapted some Christian imagery, with features such as small horns and bat-like wings being common.

¹⁰ "Capt. R S Rattray." *Collections Online | British Museum*

¹¹ Ross, pg. 34

¹² *Ibid* pg. 29

¹³ *Ibid* pg. 39

¹⁴ *Ibid* pg. 39

¹⁵ Harry R. Silver. "Beauty and the 'I' of the Beholder: Identity, Aesthetics, and Social Change among the Ashanti." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35, no. 2 (1979): pg. 203

III: *Sasabonsam at the McManus and Beyond*

The *Sasabonsam* figure at the McManus is a free-standing wooden figure with a light, reflective patina. It is described as a winged figure, with a vague working title ascribed to it—*Figure of a Monster*; “*Sasabonsam*.” From the archival information attached to the figure, the McManus acquired *Sasabonsam* by some A. R. Walker in 1965, noting that it was probably carved sometime in the 1930s. Interestingly, the tag stating such basic information seems to have originally claimed that the place of origin for the figure was Nigeria, but at some point thereafter, Nigeria was scratched out, and another hand commented, “No, Ghana.”

Notable details of the object are its stubby horns, bat-like wings, looped legs with backwards facing feet, a pronounced textured beard, and its prominent male genitalia. Each one of these components seem to point to Bonsu being the genuine author of the carving; the British Museum’s version of a *sasabonsam* figure shares strikingly similar features to the one at the McManus [Fig 3]. Both of these figures seem to have the explicit purpose of acting as “tourist” objects; they are freestanding objects with little purpose other than to be on display. Furthermore, literature suggests that the figure of *sasabonsam* is not a popular motif among general Asante groups other than for the purpose of adorning regalia.¹⁶ It appears that the motif of *sasabonsam* caught on to the tourist market soon after its first appearance on a linguist staff, as a certain Captain Wise commissioned a freestanding figuration after viewing the staff, an Robert Rattray then following suit.¹⁷

Given multiple actors involved in English colonial presence engaged with the Asante went out of their way to commission Bonsu directly for a figure depicting *sasabonsam*, there is clearly an attractive element of *sasabonsam* in the tourist market. There is some evidence that *sasabonsam* suddenly gained popularity as a tourist motif after Bonsu first established its physical figuration because of its digestibility to a Western eye. Christian motifs relating to devilish imagery combined with what a tourist might think of as stereotypical features of African art make *sasabonsam* easy for a tourist to understand.¹⁸ Furthermore, though a piece of tourist art, *Sasabonsam* fulfills some criteria of acting as a “traditional” piece of African art under the gaze of a colonizer’s eye—it is made by an “authentic” carver of Asante art, it partially reflects Asante

¹⁶ Silver, “The Culture of...” pg. 202

¹⁷ Ross, “The Life of...” pg. 39

¹⁸ Rosette, “Art Markets, Images, and Commercialization” pg. 38-40

aesthetics, and though *Sasabonsam* would most likely would not have been a figure displayed in an Asante home, it is still nonetheless a motif that is found on other Asante objects, thus rendering the figure an object of desire for someone like A. R. Walker.¹⁹

Regarding the identity of Walker, I was unable to track down his specific history. Combing through obituaries and birth records provided little help in determining his identity. It seems reasonable, though, to assume that Walker may have been a Dundee native or at least transplant giving *Sasabonsam* was donated directly to the McManus by Walker. Given the time frame of when the McManus' *Sasabonsam* is presumed to have been made as well as its donation date of 1965, it seems reasonable too to suggest that Walker was most likely involved in British colonial presence in Kumasi to some extent—Bonsu's clientele seems not to have been the generic tourist, but officials of British Empire that he interacted with on a personal level, with no middleman to initiate transactions such as in Wise and Rattray's case. Thus, Walker may have been someone who, if he were to have been a ranking official as I have assumed, interacted with Bonsu directly for the commission of *Sasabonsam*. In the end, however, though knowing the full extent of Walker's identity would be helpful in typifying the interaction he might have had with Bonsu as well as giving a better picture as to how and why *Sasabonsam* found itself at the McManus, the fact that there is an artist's name attached as well as the donors allows for the possibility of more successful further research of provenance. Moreover, the very fact that there is a named artist renders the object as one which may be seen as categorically different than other pieces of African art currently in the McManus' collection which lack any source of authorship.

IV: *Tourist Art, Modern Art, and Display*

Moving now to consider what should be done with *Sasabonsam* at the McManus, I would like to posit that the most appropriate course of action is to put the object on display—whether this would be appropriate in Albert Hall is a question I will address latter. Restitution in the sense that *Sasabonsam* be returned into the hands of either the Ghanaian government or someone in Bonsu's family seems unnecessary; the object, as I have hypothesized, was most likely acquired by Walker via consensual means, closing questions of ethical ambiguity. As for my suggestion that *Sasabonsam* be put on display—consider some of the questions associated with reasons for

¹⁹ Larry Shiner "'Primitive Fakes,' 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (1994): pg. 226

acting on restitution, or those which explain why the holding of African art objects in Western institutions is unethical. One understanding for the unethical nature of displays of African art objects is that their exhibition actively negates the purpose of their being; in the spirit of Dan Hicks, these objects become “zombies” because they are denied the ability to live out their spiritual, religious, or other intended purpose.²⁰ Knowing that *Sasabonsam* is a tourist object, its purpose, then, is to be displayed. Thus, the most appropriate course of action in terms of fulfilling the object’s purpose is to pull *Sasabonsam* from confinement in the gallery’s archives, and put it where it can be seen.

There might, however, be problems with this conclusion. The purpose of *Sasabonsam* may indeed be to stand on display—but the original intention for display, concerning why Walker would have showcased the object in his own home, may undermine a modern display of *Sasabonsam*. Tourist objects act as a means to symbolize the buyers socioeconomic status and proof of travel.²¹ In other words, *Sasabonsam*’s display on part of Walker could have carried the intention of acting as a trophy of his involvement with Empire on the Gold Coast. If, then, the original intention for the display of *Sasabonsam* was to act as a symbol of colonialist superiority, display of the object in a gallery becomes inappropriate. Yet, despite this complication, I propose that the way in which *Sasabonsam* could (and should) be displayed would have the affect of acknowledging this challenging portion of the object’s original purpose of display, and render it as one which instead brings much needed attention to the author of the piece.

Part of the problem with exhibitions like *Dundee and the World* is that their displays are mostly composed of objects which have no traceable author. The consequences of this are vast: First, the focus of the objects history shifts to that of its collector, which, although important in terms of recovering object provenance, inevitably over-emphasizes the identity of a character who does not need more popularity. Moreover, author-less displays subliminally cast a shadow of a-historicism upon their objects. Thus, displaying an object like *Sasabonsam* which does have a named author attached to its production has the potential to act as a powerful force in turning the narrative of African art objects as tokens of an ahistorical place to a dynamic one.

²⁰ Dan Hicks, *Necrography* In *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. Pluto Press, 2020. Pg. 25–36.

²¹ Jules-Rossette “Introduction” pg. 3

To further illustrate why exactly the display of *Sasabonsam* is the most appropriate course of action, I think it's worth again addressing why the object is not on display in the first place. As said before, the original curator for Albert Hall thought of *Sasabonsam* as being too modern. Yet, looking around the exhibit, there are other figurative objects which are in fact more recent in production—most notably, another piece of “tourist art,” Thomas Ona’s *Boat Figure* dated to 1940 [Fig. 4].²² Why Ona’s work is displayed while *Bonsu*’s is not, is not because Ona’s aesthetics are any less modern than *Bonsu*’s (in fact, I would argue that Ona’s is more “modern” in terms of its aesthetic value, as Ona frequently stated he was depicting the world as he saw it—a “modernist” line of thinking).²³ Ona’s work is on display because it is more appealing to a Western ego: a white man sits leisurely at the front of the boat, lazily smoking his pipe, while black children sitting behind do the work of sailing. Debate surrounds this figuration and whether or not Ona meant it as a satirical piece, but either way, the average museum-goer who merely glances over the piece will digest it as one which elevates the position of the white colonizer and demotes that of the African. Following this line of thought, *Sasabonsam* is “too modern” because its lack of an appeal to a neocolonialist gaze.

My overall suggestion, then, is that *Bonsu*’s *Sasabonsam*, perhaps along with Ona’s own work, be put into their own respective exhibition which focuses not on subliminally displaying “exotic” objects as the fruits of Empire, but as a exposition of how artists of pre-independent African states interacted with colonialism in the early to mid 20th century. Contemporary thinkers such as Chika Okeke argue that African artists pre-independence were incapable of engaging with modernism given the impositions of colonial rule.²⁴ Though Okeke’s point is compelling, ‘tourist’ works like *Bonsu*’s and Ona’s pose a challenge against this conclusion. Both of the artists, though working on commission for Western audiences, employed subtle aspects of modernism in the sense that they reinterpreted the aesthetic standards of their respective cultures. Furthermore, the working idea that modern art and traditional art being not antithetical, but an integral part to how African art renews itself works against Okeke’s thesis, as it implies that artists like *Bonsu* do not need to work under independence in order to produce modern works. Okoye reflects on the nature of modern and traditional African artists, stating: “...African popular artists often insist on their connection to the traditional spheres while the traditional

²² Thomas Ona Odulate, *Model Boat Figurine*, Lagos, Nigeria. 1930s-1950s.

²³ “Thomas Ona Boat Group.” *Peter Petrou Works of Art*

²⁴ “Modern African Art.” in *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, 2013, pp. 26–38.

artists also maintain a self-conscious relationship with the modern or the metropolitan site.”²⁵ Overall, the categorical ambiguity of African artists like Bonsu, as either modernist or simply tourist, presents a museum like the McManus the opportunity to elevate the complexity of conversations surrounding the era of pre-independence for African states.

V: *Conclusion*

To close, the McManus finds itself the opportunity to elevate the complex status of under-addressed named African artists like Osei Bonsu. Bonsu’s work, *Sasabonsam*, though in need of further provenance, has the ability to act as means to spark much needed conversation regarding how African artists in pre-independent states were able to manifest their creativity and respond to their changing environment. Other courses of action which the McManus could take to elevate Bonsu’s work is to perhaps contact the institutions which Bonsu once taught at, or even those American ones which hosted his artworks during his lifetime. Overall, the McManus could use this opportunity to introduce a named African artist to a growing movement of elevating voices once previously overlooked.

²⁵ Chukwuma Okoye “Cannibalization as Popular Tradition in Igbo Masquerade Performance.” *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 2 (2010): pg. 22

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“Thomas Ona Boat Group.” *Peter Petrou Works of Art*, <https://www.peterpetrou.com/design-ethnographic-ancient-art/sold-archive/2834/thomas-ona-boat-group>.

List of Figures

Figure 1:

Osei Bonsu. *Figure of a monster; Sasabonsam*. Kumasi, Ghana. 1930s. In the archives of the McManus Museum, Dundee. Donated by A. R. Walker, 1965. Photo courtesy of Elena Bowden



Figure 2:

Osei Bonsu. *Sword Hilt of Sasabonsam*. Photo taken from Doran Ross's *The Art of Osei Bonsu*.
Unknown date.



Figure 3:
Osei Bonsu. *Figure*. Curtesy of the British Museum. Donated 1935 by Robert Wild.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1935-1212-1



Figure 4:
Thomas Ona Odulate, Model Boat Figurine, Lagos, Nigeria. 1930s-1950s. In McManus
Museum, Dundee. Donation from Miss A. Hutchinson, 1983

