Art historians who organize exhibitions are constructing a framework for viewers to respond to art works. Obviously, the framework is physical, made of painted walls and display cases, lighting systems and printed captions. However, the framework is also conceptual, as the presentation, placement, and juxtaposition of art works create a narrative. In some cases, these conceptual frameworks are built upon centuries of solid scholarship and are buttressed by the contributions of dozens of specialists. In other cases, however, frameworks are more precariously balanced upon fragmentary sources, and only a handful of scholars have provided materials to support the structure. As I plan an exhibition of the art of the Lagoon peoples and their neighbors in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, I am uncomfortably aware that the second description applies to my project. Yet simply because each component of this slender structure must be so carefully examined and tested during the construction process, the resulting framework is creating some unexpected views. One strikingly new set of frames presents arts from this region as products of the twentieth century. This paper will explain why the exhibi’s categorization of Lagoon works as “twentieth century African art” is a reassessment of the ways African art has been viewed in the past, and why the inclusion of the full range of art works produced by twentieth century Lagoon artists will be both controversial and provocative.

As an initial caveat, I must note that some types of Lagoon arts have clearly been made for periods spanning hundreds of years. These include funerary terracottas. Heads unearthed in archaeological excavations in the lands of one Lagoon group, the Eotile (Vëtre) people, have been dated to the seventeenth century (Polet 1987). Even though two authorities have presented these terracottas as Akan responses to the arrival of European religious statuary on the coast (see Polet 2001), I believe that the Lagoon images are more plausibly connected to earlier traditions of fired clay images produced much further inland and may thus draw upon practices begun prior to European contact. Like their Anyi/Aowin neighbors, Lagoon potters in the Ayie (Attie), Gwa (M’Batto), and Esuma (Assini) regions continued to make funerary images in clay until the twentieth century (Soppealsa 1982, Coronel 1978), even though the practice has now been abandoned in favor of cement tombs, framed photographs, and memorial t-shirts.

Written accounts by European visitors also document the antiquity of certain art forms. Gold jewelry was described in Loyer’s account of regalia at Assini (an Esuma population now absorbed by the neighboring Nzima and Anyi), and was...

1. Ernestine Melodge
"Untitled," 1984
Acrylic on canvas, 116cm x 81cm (45½" x 32")
Collection of the Association pour la Defense et l’Illustration des Arts d’Afrique et d’Oceanie (ADEIAO)
thus present in some Lagoon areas in the seventeenth century as well (Gott 2003). We have as yet no archaeological evidence that Lagoon goldsmiths actually cast these objects (which might have been imports), but oral traditions claim they were once made in most Lagoon regions. Almost all Lagoon languages include words for "goldsmith," even though heavy gold jewelry (Cover) is produced today in only a few Lagoon locations. Goldsmiths in Ana, a Kyaman community, have been active throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Finally, carved posts were described by an explorer named Hecquard when he visited Abure, Gwa, and Kyaman (Ebrie) communities in the nineteenth century. The imagery of these posts, few of which have survived, seems to be closely tied to the iconography of ivory objects now in Western collections. Evidently the ivories were once attached to staffs, as canes with ivory finials in somewhat simpler forms are still carried.
by wealthy Lagoon men and women. Since staffs are passed down as heirlooms from generation to generation, the ivories—which have survived—and the posts—which have not—may have both been carved in the precolonial past (Visorà 1987a).

Yet although some sculpture and some gold and ivory objects now in European and North American collections might have been made or even collected in the nineteenth century, most Lagoon objects did not leave the region until the twentieth century. This was due in part to the limited number of contacts between Europeans and Lagoon peoples prior to colonization, which began in the first decades of the twentieth century. Only the Esuma (Assini) and Eotile (Vetro) seem to have hosted European settlements for prolonged periods prior to that. Other coastal Lagoon peoples, such as the Abure, Aladyan (Alladian), Ahizì, and Avikam (Bignam), had many fewer European residents because of the lack of safe harbors in their coastal territory. Communities north of the coastal Lagoons (the Adjuku, Kyaman, southern Akye, and Gwa) were only in direct con-
tact with Europeans after French trading posts and Catholic missions were established in the first years of the twentieth century, and inland groups (the Ahíjí, Krobi, Abe, and northern Akye) were only "pacified" by the French in the 1920s. With a very few exceptions, most Lagoon art works now in European and North American collections were traded, purchased, received as gifts, commissioned, stolen, or confiscated in the colonial period (c. 1910 to 1960). And although collectors often assume that their African sculpture was created and in use for generations before it left Africa, there is little evidence in the Lagoon region to back up this assumption. I will thus make the scandalous proposal that most extant Lagoon wooden figures were made (as well as collected) in the twentieth century. A second, related proposal counters the assumption that wooden figures in Western collections all came from "traditional" contexts. None of the elders I interviewed in the 1980s would speculate about the ways sculpture had been used before they were born, and few trusted their memories of the ways in which missionary activity had transformed the beliefs and practices of their parents' generation (Visonné 1986). According to the fragmentary recollections of Adjíkru, Alabyán, and Avikam elders, some dramatic practices involving large statury groups were abandoned in the early twentieth century. By the late twentieth century, in some areas anthropomorphic figures were still being used by healers to communicate with spirits, but even those objects have undergone shifts in meaning (Fig. 2). While these statues were often described as connecting healers to forest spirits, diviners were increasingly likely to identify their contacts in the supernatural world as a type of "angel" and to describe their figures as a type of radio or television "transmitter." Figures carved for dancers in secular performances are often figures representing deceased twins or an "other world" partner may appear to be "traditional," but how many of these roles stretch back centuries, and how many are the result of recent contact with other populations?

Art created for age-grades has been particularly liable to change. Young men described the large wooden sculptural groups displayed on planks they carried or wheeled during age-grade ceremonies as "traditional," even while they stressed the tendency for these sculptural groups to become larger and more elaborate with each succeeding festival. Yet elders told me that age-grades of their fathers' generation displayed only drums, personal insignia, and flags. While none of the older men could remember who introduced the first carved images, almost all adults remember when small images carried by young girls were replaced by larger images carried by the group's strongest warriors (Fig. 3).

On the other hand, purely decorative sculpture may predominate any Western pressures to display art for art's sake. These objects, which are displayed in the reception areas of their owners' homes (Fig. 4), testify to the wealth and sophistication of the men and women who purchased them from local artists, itinerant artists, or artists working in distant cities. I once assumed that these were fairly recent additions to the corpus of Lagoon art because they were not associated with any of the "traditional" contexts in which other types of art appear. Yet just as goldsmiths have long produced freestanding images for "displays of gold," carvers may have been creating secular, entertaining objects for several generations.

Other questions about the longevity of "traditional" art forms arise in the study of textiles. Men and women who are honored at Lagoon ceremonies today wear "traditional" kente, now exclusively imported from Ghana. Yet oral accounts describe beaten barkcloth as the fabric worn by nineteenth-century wealthy Akye leaders, and I was shown a remnant of this thick, creamy white material. Men and women attending Adjíkru, Alabyán, and Avikam ceremonies still wear beautiful woven raffia cloth which has been tied with local pigments. From what little we know of the history of the Lagoon region in the early colonial period, all art forms seem to have been modified, adapted, and rejected in order to conform to changing notions of supernatural power, political leadership, and community values. It seems clear to me that even Lagoon art of the early twentieth century had, in the dramatic words of André Magnin and Jacques Soulilou, "fallen prey to adulteration, compliance, and compromise" (1996:7)—Lagoon art forms have never been static and isolated. The styles of many twentieth century Lagoon objects may be called "classic," a term I find intriguing and possibly useful. While the lack of adequate collection data for all but a handful of pieces complicates our ability to assign specific pieces to the Lagoon region, I have found it expedient to describe certain formal characteristics as representative of a "classic" Lagoon style. Obviously a work displaying these stylistic traits can only be said to be part of a corpus of similar images; it cannot be proven to have been created by a Lagoon artist, by an non-Lagoon artist working for Lagoon patrons, or by a Lagoon artist working for non-Lagoon patrons, unless it is accompanied by additional documentation. Wooden statues in this "Lagoon style" often reward close observation (Fig. 5). Masterful artisans manipulated mass, proportion, and contour in highly inventive ways. The emphasis on outstretched hands, compressed legs, and imposing heads may be the result of the roles played by figures used by diviners. Healers claimed that these statues could see clearly, could walk at night, and could move independently through space. Of course, not all diviners were able to commission works from a master, and I am convinced that weaker, less successfully executed statuary (Fig. 6)
has always existed beside the much more accomplished examples (Fig. 7). And imported art works (such as plaster Madonnas and plastic dolls, Figs. 8–9) have sometimes taken the place of images carved by local artists.

These visually striking objects inspired modern European artists in the past and are still treasured by Western collectors. Yet most art works used in Lagoon communities today display a naturalistic style quite different from the “classic” forms prevalent in previous generations. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, two life-size, exceeding realistic figures were collected by a Captain Fuller. One became part of the collection of the British Museum (Fig. 10). William Fagg believed these figures were purchased in a coastal Lagoon community before 1905 (personal communication 1981). By the late twentieth century, naturalism was preferred by almost all Lagoon patrons, and diviners specifically asked sculptors to produce lifelike images. The tastes of my Lagoon informants, I should note, closely resemble those of my students in Colorado. This preference for detailed realism is perhaps due to the impact of photographic images upon young people around the world.

The culmination of these naturalistic tendencies may be seen in the work of Emile Guebbeh (or Gbelli) and Nicholas Damas, who are not of Lagoon origin but who have a workshop in the Lagoon territory surrounding the city of Abidjan. They carve wooden figures on commission for age-grade ceremonies, for dance groups, and for families organizing gold displays (Fig. 11). Like Lagoon figures from the past, most of the female figures carved by Guebbeh, Damas, and other contemporary artists are nude (and will be clothed by their owners), or are shown in the hip beads and red loincloth which were once the only required apparel of a young adult woman. In addition to these works in wood, Emile Guebbeh has fashioned cement figures for tombs. During the last two decades, the artists have sold figures to private individuals as well—some Ivorian and some foreign. One New Yorker, author and editor Mark Getlein, was so enchanted by the life-size figures of Guebbeh and his associates in a 1999 installation at the Deitch Projects in New York that he included a photograph of the display in a popular art appreciation textbook (Getlein 2005:11.28; Cotter 1999).

Emile Guebbeh recently had a solo show at the Jack Sheinman Gallery. It is fitting that his figures are now shown in Manhattan, as Guebbeh told me that the pornographic magazines he uses to model his spectacular nudes were sent to him by a friend in New York City. Yet despite the international exposure of Guebbeh and Damas, they are still practicing in the Côte d’Ivoire as “classical” artists. Their figures play an important social and political role in Lagoon communities, and many of the statues they have carved are said to be animated by supernatural powers during ceremonies and age-grades. The statues they produce are usually commissioned directly by the group or individual who purchases, and displays, them. The relationships between Guebbeh and Damas and their patrons conform to those linking other Lagoon artists and patrons. In fact, several artists told me that they differ from Western artists because they only worked on commission, and they saw this as fundamentally different from European artists (or from artists working for European patrons) who always had art “in stock” available for purchase. In their eyes, Guebbeh and Damas are typically “African” artists.

Even though the abstract styles of the early twentieth century have been abandoned by artists working for Lagoon communities, works carved in the older styles are evidently still being produced for sale to non-Lagoon patrons. Although the artists who sculpt these replicas of older works have not been located or identified, there are two fine studies of similar artists working in neighboring areas: Chris Steiner has described Baule workshops in Bouake, north of the Lagoon region (1994), and Ross and Reichert have described a Ghanaian workshop, west of the Lagoon region (1983). Both of these carving cen-
ters produce wonderful objects for sale to merchants who sell them to foreign buyers. Recent wooden sculpture created in an accomplished “Lagoon” style may come from workshops such as these. The figures display excellent workmanship and are much more masterfully carved than most late twentieth century work still being used by Lagoon diviners and dance troupes.

As Ross and Reichert have pointed out, ethical issues abound when researchers trace a “classic” art work to one of these workshops. As already noted, Lagoon artists have usually worked on commission, but artists from these workshops are producing work to meet the specifications of traders who will sell it to foreign clients. Once traders have brought these recently carved art objects to Europe and North America, art dealers will evaluate the works solely on the basis of their style and patina. Dealers will buy objects that are in outmoded, “antiqued” styles because they believe those objects to be “old” and thus “authentic” (or because they believe that they can sell the objects as “old” and “authentic”). As H.M. Cole so clearly states, Westerners consider such works to be “fakes,” even if they are of high aesthetic quality.

The little documentation I have for this process suggests that the artists themselves may not have intended to deceive their clients. This can be seen in the case of a series of replicas based upon a Kyaman (Ebrée) figure. In the early 1980s, an art student named Lucien Ehouo brought a statue to the National Museum in Abidjan. It had been carved generations earlier in his hometown, a Lagoon village not far from the capital, and was owned by a diviner. He wanted to photograph the statue in order to use it as a model for a design project. According to the essay he wrote to accompany this project (the equivalent of an MFA exhibition), a group of sculptors at the National Museum made faithful copies of the statue in order to document the artistic heritage of the Kyaman people (Ehouo 1985–86).

Sculptors at the National Museum may also have based a series of replicas on a Lagoon work in the collection of the National Museum, which was reproduced in an influential French catalogue (Feau et al. 1989:55, no. 12). The pose, the proportions, and even the damaged feet of the figure are often reproduced by the contemporary artists. These carvers are conforming to practices found throughout the world, as artists often train their eyes and hands by replicating masterpieces of previous generations. To the best of my knowledge, no exhibition curator has intentionally included reproductions such as this in a survey of a region’s art; mine would be the first to do so.

The potential legitimacy of replicas in the Lagoon region can be discussed in the context of the choices now available to Lagoon artists. I was told that one talented young artist in a Lagoon village had joined a Baule workshop in Bouake in order to apprentice with professional sculptors, while another (from the same village and the same age grade) had enrolled in an art institute in Abidjan in order to learn to paint. Unbeknownst to the community (and to the young men themselves), these paths would dictate that the young painter would be producing canvases which the Western art market considers to be acceptable (if somewhat
provincial) expressions of artistic practice, while the young sculptor would either create naturalistic forms (regarded as “folk art” by Western collectors), or replicas of earlier statues which the Western art market considers to be “forgeries” and unacceptable expressions of artistic practice.

The talented young painter followed in the footsteps of a Lagoon artist active in the first half of the twentieth century. Christian Lattier, raised in the Lagoon region during the colonial era, left the Côte d’Ivoire to study sculpture in France. He returned to his native country after independence and worked there until his untimely death at age 53 in 1978. Today his playful constructions are in the collection of the National Museum (Konaté 1993). This tradition of foreign study continued a generation later, with a group of young students at the National Institute of Art in Abidjan who wrote a manifesto naming themselves “Vohou-Vohou” (Court 1995:296). Like Christian Lattier, most have been able to study in France. The works they produced during their studies abroad were exhibited under the patronage of one of their professors in Paris, and their paintings were purchased by a nonprofit French foundation in the late 1970s. The Vohou-Vohou artists identify themselves as Ivorian rather than as members of specific ethnic groups, but several of the artists (Damase Aboueuf, Yousef Bath, Joseph Anouma, and Ernestine Meledged) were born and raised in Lagoon communities and are now teaching in towns located in the Lagoon region (Figs. 1, 12). Would I be justified in including them in an exhibition of Lagoon art—or would this inclusion be “essentializing” their identities as members of ethnic groups rather than as citizens of Côte d’Ivoire, of Africa, or of the world?

If each Lagoon work I wish to exhibit raises its own set of issues, my attempt to juxtapose disparate works of arts will be particularly controversial. There appear to be remarkably few exhibitions which address the entire corpus of twentieth century African art. The groundbreaking exhibition organized by Susan Vogel, “Africa Explores” (1991), was not followed by a similarly inclusive project until Fall and Pivin’s “Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century” (2002) a decade later. Both exhibitions featured a few works of art in “classic” styles made for communities in the early twentieth century, and Vogel’s catalogue also illustrated art works in a variety of styles which were carved in the late twentieth century for community use (Vogel 1991: chapters 1–2). While collectors and African art historians might assume that the beautiful forms of sculpture of the early twentieth century should be included in any broad discussion of African art, critics with little exposure to art beyond the West may see no reason to pay critical attention to work rooted in African communities. In fact, one observer has dismissed these works as “the tribal carving and patterned textiles too long promoted as African’s only creative output” (Pollack 2001:124).
plores” was fierce. Some attacks focused upon the sins of omission. In the words of Magnin and Soulliol, it put “a sort of premium on a postmodern primitivism” by featuring contemporary artists who were self-taught or who were trained in African workshops (1996:14). If I include naturalistic figures by artists such as Emile Guebeh, I risk similar criticism for foregrounding, in the words of dele jegede, “functional effigies and folk art . . . with a bent for salacious naiveté” (1998:193).

African critics also stressed the sins of exclusion in “Africa Explores,” for in their eyes it failed to adequately acknowledge the importance of African artists working in new media and in new styles during the colonial period, and it gave too little exposure to African artists trained in universities and art institutes. If I include the work of Christian Lattier in my exhibition, I honor the contributions of an African artist who contributed to the development of modernism in both France and the Côte d’Ivoire. If I include the sensual, abstract paintings of Lagoon artists who were members of Yokou-Yokou, I would acknowledge the role of the artists in forging a new national identity for contemporary Ivorian art. The philosophical underpinnings of these paintings, expressed through formal manifestoes, links them to similar idealistic art movements in other African nations. However, the formal beauty and ideological sincerity of these works is puzzling to American critics, who consider Abstract Expressionism to be the last gasp of modernism, and who are only familiar with the detached irony of postmodernism. The American critic Christopher Knight (2003) thus characterized similarly accomplished Senegalese painters in the “Saint in the City” exhibition as “engaged in an academic conversation with antiquated School of Paris Modernism.”

Despite the controversies raised by “Africa Explores,” I plan to create an inclusive project which will document as fully as possible the dimensions of twentieth-century art in one region of Africa. I will look at museum installations as a model. One was “Ghana Yesterday and Today” at the Musée Dapper in Paris, which surveyed the art of the Ghanaian Akan (Falayrettes-Leveau and Owusu-Sarpong 2003). It combined wooden statues, gold objects, and terracottas from the colonial period with contemporary paintings and coffins from urban workshops and discussed the work of academically trained artists living in Ghana as well as the art of expatriate Ghanaians Owusu Ankomah and El Anatsui. Each work was presented in the context of contemporary Ghana, and several essays stressed the interconnectedness of art made in the country during the colonial and postcolonial periods.30

My second inspiration is the installation of the Musée d’Orsay, also in Paris. This museum is dedicated to French art from the 1860s to the 1930s, years when France was the undisputed leader of the European art world. Visitors might assume that the paintings of the most beloved and influential artists of the period, such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Georges Seurat (1859–1891), would be placed in the most accessible galleries. Instead, they are crammed into the stuffy little rooms on the top floors. The spacious ground floor is given over to the work of artists such as Pierre Puvis de Chavanne (1824–1898) and Alexandre Cabanel (1823–1899), whose theatrically posed, vivid, and colorful paintings were approved by the French Academy but were ridiculed by artists and by art historians during most of the twentieth century. By giving these works such prominence, the curators are refusing to impose their own tastes on the works of the past and are allowing the public to see the full range of art produced in France during this pivotal moment in the modern era. Perhaps a similar inclusive approach will allow me to create structurally sound framework for viewing the twentieth century art produced by, and experienced by, members of Lagoon communities.

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NOTICE TO OUR READERS

Due to increased security at American ports, African Arts has become subject to unexpected delays, as the magazine is printed in Hong Kong and shipped to a distribution center in the US for mailing. This is a circumstance beyond our control, but we apologize for the effect this has on the regularity of publication.
The integration of religion and social form in African art is crucial but often overlooked. Ethnographic research might prove invaluable to African art history, except that the latter field is often unwilling to engage anthropological cognitive bodies of research on African religion.

16. The solitary nature of M'bati practices among the Owelte Igbo and the prevalence of similar forms of the West Niger state suggest that M'bati was an isolated phenomenon (1975:56-119) investigated possible links between M'bati and similar architectural complexes among the Western Igbo and Edo peoples, but it could be isolated for further investigation of Kuba Igbo. Ogbechie 1993 traces the possible relationship between M'bati and similar architectural complexes arrived the Owelte-Igbo region from the Ibo Kingdom of Benin.

17. Social anthropologist, characterized by the study of social relationships, specifically refers to the mode of ethnographically-oriented ontological anthropology among the 1950s and 1970s. Recent anthropological research has moved beyond this problem. See Cribb 1998 for analysis of changing methodologies of anthropology of non-Western peoples and the path of anthropological analysis of the inscription of Africa in Western discussions.

18. The affective speech is given to each Benin owner by his ilike (divine) during the ritual to consecrate his Ilbog. It is very personal and attended to each man's life force (ndi). Analysis of Ilbog therefore should proceed from the perspective of the transversal rather than the physical form of the object. For analysis of the role of ilike in light culture,

**STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (Required by 36 F.R. 3512,有效性) **

1 Publication Title: African Arts

2. Published Date: 1968, 01-02-03

3. Issue Frequency: Quarterly, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter

4. Number of Issues Published During Previous Calendar Year: 4

5. Annual Subscription Price: $72.00

6. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: The James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 10868 Burch Hall, Box 931510, University of California Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510

7. Publisher: Odeh, Mollie

8. Owner: Owners of the University of California, 405 Hilgard, Los Angeles, CA 90095

9. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages:

10. Purpose, function and nonprofit status of the organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during preceding 12 months:

11. Issue date for circulation data below: 36, 01-03-05

12. Rent or Nature of Circulation:

a. Total number of copies distributed during preceding 12 months:

b. Total number of copies distributed during preceding 12 months:

13. Statement of Circulation:

14. Description of Circulation: 01-03-05

15. Circulation Data:

16. Total CIRCULATION: 01-03-05

17. Source of all data used in preparing this statement:

18. Certification: Certified:

19. Signature and Title:

20. Date:

**State of California: Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510

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