

ART ON THE MARGINS:
A REINTRODUCTION OF THE ART HISTORY
OF THE SOTHO OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

THESIS

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By

David M. M. Riep

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Monica Blackmun Visonà, Assistant Professor of Art History

Lexington, Kentucky

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Chapter I. Introduction to the Topic

The inspiration for this study stems directly from my personal experiences living in South Africa from 2000-2002. I resided in Harrismith, in the Free State province, which lies close to the landlocked country of Lesotho, as well as to the former southern Sotho Homeland/Bantustan of Qwaqwa (also known as Phuthaditjhaba and Witsieshoek). Given its proximity to these two areas, the town supported a large southern Sotho population. On the outskirts of Harrismith one finds 42nd Hill, where the majority of my southern Sotho acquaintances resided (Fig. 1). Prior to living in South Africa, I had not been aware of the southern Sotho as a people, whom I hereafter refer to as Basotho or Sotho, nor of their rich culture and arts. However, the time I spent and the friendships I made allowed me to gain great personal insights into the modern Sotho culture, as well as lasting relationships.

While working with an NGO, I spent the majority of my time with the local Sotho street children, whose ages ranged from 8 to twenty years. These young men soon became my circle of friends, with whom I passed the days through long soccer games, and meals. Eventually I was able to visit some of their families and was included in numerous events, including holidays and funerals. Although my purpose was not scholarly, I was able to learn about and understand many aspects of Sotho life, culture and language. And it is because of my friends that I chose to conduct my research on the Sotho arts.

During the summer following my return to the United States, I was able to visit my friends in Harrismith again, as well as arrange a visit to the National Museum in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, to view its collection of Sotho art. With the help of Dr. Zoë Henderson, I was able to view the objects first hand, which allowed me to complete this project.

i. Geographic and Historic Scope of Project

The goal of this paper is to provide an art historical background of the Sotho culture and offer a formal analysis of the culture's art objects. Although original fieldwork would be necessary to complete a study of the art of the Sotho, the available literature on Basotho culture provides a rich bank of data with which to begin. Thus, I am presenting the first compilation of this information as a starting point for future endeavors into the art of the Sotho. Both missionary journals and scholarly works highlight the belief systems, political climate and personal interactions of this complex group. These descriptions mention art objects, although the objects may not be the focus of attention. Furthermore, current surveys on the art of Africa include few, if any, Sotho objects, and often rely on the broad categorization of "Southern Africa," rather than highlighting objects from this particular culture.¹ By gleaning these references to objects from existing

¹ Aside from Gary van Wyk's book, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*, specific references to the art of the Sotho are sparse. Monica Blackmun Visonà's text, *A History of Art in*

literature, and paying close attention to the contexts in which Basotho art appears, a closer understanding of its meaning and place in Basotho society may be found.

At first glance, one may notice the overwhelming lack of sources that approach the subject of art among the Sotho. One of the main reasons for the deficiency of historical literature focusing on the arts may be directly linked with the worldview of the individuals who are creating this history. When examining these various written accounts and histories, one must keep in mind the concept of categorization. Western concepts of art may require a distinction between objects of beauty and objects of utility.² However,

Africa, addresses the Sotho along with other Nguni groups, and includes images of a Sotho staff and a snuff container. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, by Tom Phillips, which accompanied an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, includes a Sotho staff among other objects attributed to Southern Africa. Even exhibitions and texts focusing on the art of southern or South Africa are rare. *The Art of Southeast Africa*, by Sandra Klopper and Karel Nel, features 8 Sotho specific objects among more than 120 examples from the region. Finally, the catalog for the exhibition entitled *Art and Ambiguity*, includes 15 specifically Sotho pieces among the 862 works from the Brenthurst collection of southern African art. However, it should also be noted that a large portion of the objects in both catalogs are not given a specific attribution.

² For further discussion on the topic of Art v. Craft, see: Arthur C. Danto, "Artifact and Art," *Art/artifact: African art in anthropological collections* (New York: Center for African Art, 1988), p. 18-32.; Patricia Davison, "Ambiguity, Style and Meaning," *Art and Ambiguity* (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1991), p. 12- 18; James Clifford and G.E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.); Patricia Davison, "Art as Artefact: Another Way of Seeing," *De Arte*, 1990, 42 p. 38-41; Susan Vogel, "Introduction," *Art/artifact : African art in anthropological collections* (New York: Center for African Art, 1988); Johan van Schalkwyk, "Looking from the Outside: The Historical Context of the Brenthurst Collection of Southern African Art," *Art and Ambiguity* (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1991), p. 20-29; James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).; S. L. Kasfir. "One Tribe, One Style. Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art," *History in Africa* 1984, 11, p. 163-169.; S. L. Kasfir. *Contemporary African Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999); Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and*

the Sotho do not maintain such strict categories. They recognize artistry in the making, using and appreciation of all of their material objects. Yet, in all of the historical accounts I encountered, the arts are discussed as an afterthought.

Throughout much of the history of the Sotho, art appears to have been an understatement, a reflection of the melding of everyday life and culture with the arts. The arts have evidently never been seen as specific devices on their own, but rather functioned with life and living. They have been assimilated into a truly artistic culture. There is a true blending between aesthetics and use, which only serves to add to this vibrant culture overall. The Sotho, unlike their Western counterparts, did not create any institutions through which to differentiate art from the ordinary. Furthermore, there were no shrines, sacred installations or hallowed performance pieces that distinguished the objects as dwelling in a separate realm beyond the ordinary. Thus, when examining and re-presenting the history of art of the Sotho culture, we are doubly challenged with the task of not only finding the relevant sources, but sifting through the semantics of Western thought of the nineteenth century in order to establish a complete range of forms within Sotho art.

Politics of Museum Display (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).; Annie E. Coombes. *Reinventing Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).; Sandra Klopper. "The Carver in Africa: Individually Acclaimed Artist or Anonymous Artisan?" *Social Dynamics*. 19 (1) 39-51, 1993.; Sally Price. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

After establishing the range of forms produced by Sotho artists, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the objects themselves. Although many major museums house collections of Sotho objects, including the British Museum in London, the Chicago Field Museum, and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, few have compiled and published any relevant information surrounding the works of art and their significance to the culture. Thus, I will be using selected examples obtained from the collection of the National Museum of Bloemfontein, South Africa, as well as the few published images of Sotho work found in contemporary texts on African art. Although my analysis is by no means all encompassing, I hope to highlight the quality found in these various pieces, and their significance within the Sotho culture as a whole.

ii. Review of the Literature

Although limited in number, a diverse group of sources were used to construct this historical review of the Sotho and their art. It is important to identify and examine the sources themselves, as their origins and viewpoints offer additional insights towards this art history. Though they were gathered from a wide-ranging pool, they all have a common theme. They are all primary sources. By using such sources, not only are we presented with an authoritative, first hand view of the Sotho people, but we are able to

track the way that the Sotho are viewed and treated by the colonial forces over a long period of time.

First and foremost, the writing of French missionary Eugène Casalis (Fig. 2), which were first published in 1861 under the title of *The Basutos*, was easily the single most important text. Casalis lived among the Sotho for over 20 years, and his text includes details from all aspects Sotho of art, life, culture, leisure and religion. This text was invaluable as it included not only detailed descriptions of Basotho visual culture, but highlighted expressions and events of the mundane, everyday occasion. Many later authors relied on this volume as a basis for further study, as it is the authority on 19th century Basotho society. Although Casalis also penned another book in 1889, *My Life in Basutoland*, this later work focuses more on his youth, as well as his first impressions of missionary life in South Africa.

In addition to the writings of Casalis, one of his assistants, Thomas Arbousset (Fig. 3), provides further information on Basotho life through first hand experience. His book, *Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains*, written in 1840, highlights his experiences on a journey through Basotholand with its first king, Moshoeshoe I.

Following the groundbreaking work of these first wave missionaries, David-Frederic Ellenberger offers additional insights and information in his text *History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern*. First published in 1912, it not only offers outstanding bibliographic resources, but expands the general knowledge of the Sotho by outlining their political history, as well as their worldview including clan emblems and belief

systems.³ This text was helpful in identifying some of the Sotho arts. Although the majority of these objects were mentioned in passing, it nonetheless allows one to pull these references into a larger understanding of the history of Sotho art. Ellenberger spent numerous decades in Lesotho as a missionary during the mid-19th century, and his original historical work left a lasting legacy which eventually led to the founding of the Morija Museum of Sotho history in Lesotho.

Another second generation missionary who serves as a primary source was John Widdicombe. Widdicombe worked for the Thlotse mission under Chief Molapo, the third son of Moshoeshe I, throughout the 1870's. First published in 1891, his book *Fourteen Years in Basutoland* provides theories as to the origin of the Sotho, and further highlights their social life and customs. His work also makes mention of Sotho art objects, noting the presence of a strong artistic development. In addition, he makes mention of many other individuals who were working in the area at this time, which not only allows one to grasp the social climate of the country, but provides further sources for study.

Continuing on with the Ellenberger legacy in recording the history of the Sotho, Victor Ellenberger (1879-1972) offers two influential texts. He served for 32 years in Southern Africa (1903- 1917 in Barotseland; 1917-1934 in Basotholand - Lesotho) as a

³ D. Frederic Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern* (Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1992), 240-241. Ellenberger's text was originally published in 1912. He notes that liboko, or clan emblems, are animals through which particular family lineages derive their existence. For example, the Kwena family line of the southern Sotho holds the crocodile as their liboko. The animals represented are not sacrificed to or worshiped, but are honored and venerated.

missionary, and wrote *Landmarks in the Story of the French Protestant Church in Basutoland*, which was published in 1933, as well as *A Century of Mission Work in Basutoland, 1833-1933*, which followed in 1938. Both of these texts contain information regarding the impact of mission work among the Sotho, and provide historical data for Basotho culture. Their main concerns lie in the missionary advances among the Sotho, as well as the greater political events in South Africa between the Sotho, British and Boers. Furthermore, the advances of the church often include detailed information on Basotho belief systems and norms.

Rounding off my selection of missionary journals is the 1842 work *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, by Robert Moffat. Moffat was a Scottish missionary to South Africa who arrived in Cape Town in 1817. The father-in-law of the famed David Livingstone, Moffat opened numerous mission stations in the interior of the country, and eventually completed the first translation of the Bible into the language of the Bechuanas, who are now known as Tswana. Although the majority of his book surrounds his journey to and work with the Tswana, he offers great insight into the region that included the French and Wesleyan Missions. In a final chapter of the book, he writes of a visit to the Sotho, and includes a speech by Moshoeshoe praising the work of missionaries. This chapter adds insights regarding Sotho society as it appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as highlights the complexity of the relationship between the Sotho and their French counterparts.

Although the common goal among the aforementioned Christian authors, such as Casalis, Arbousset, Widdicombe, Moffat and both David and Victor Ellenberger, may have been to prove that the Sotho had the ability to reason and develop like “civilized” societies, and therefore were a worthwhile investment for the Church, their journals provide modern readers with invaluable sociological insights of this great culture. Furthermore, the overall tone of these various texts tends to place the Sotho in a positive light, almost presenting the authors as advocates for the culture within the context of colonialism. The missionaries seem to take on the position of advocate for this African culture when explaining the political events brought on from the onslaught of Western culture in Southern Africa.

In addition to these missionary journals, I came across a number of government officials who provide excellent insights into Sotho culture through their respective writings and reports. These sources offer a contrasting point of view, as many of the officials’ accounts approach the Sotho as exotic primitives through a colonial lens. The following texts, written from a political perspective, and often by members of the colonial system, tend to paint the Sotho in a far more negative light, showing the people as cleverly dishonest, unscrupulously using the missionaries as a way to halt the progress of the Empire. The single most important of these came from Bechuanaland Assistant Colonial Administrator of the Kanye district, Edmund Hugh Ashton. His book, *The Basuto: A Social Study of Traditional and Modern Lesotho*, proved to be an exceptional source. Together with Casalis’ groundbreaking volume, this book, published in 1967,

provided me with the clearest and most detailed information about the Sotho, exploring many aspects of culture and life. Aside from explaining the continuum of traditions and belief systems, it highlighted such areas as history, social background, education, social routine, religious beliefs and medicine. It is an excellent source on understanding the Sotho in any number of areas and aspects.

In addition to Ashton, several other government officials provided valuable texts which further expanded on the cultural history of the Sotho. One of these authors was Government Secretary (1884) and Resident Commissioner of Basotholand (1893-1901) Sir Godfrey Yeatman Lagden. His first book, *The Basutos: The Mountaineers & Their Country*, published in 1909, provides a history of the Sotho through British governmental documents and letters between the British Empire and Moshoeshoe. This volume includes a detailed account of British policy with the Sotho and Boers, including letters written by many of the leading individuals on all sides. This source serves to contextualize the Sotho culture from a British perspective, and expands upon the complex ideas centering on land within the Sotho worldview.

Lagden's other book, *The Native Races of the Empire*, from 1924, is a truly interesting source. This publication was part of the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, which served to showcase the "spoils of victory" of the Imperial colonization. The text simply lays out "types of natives" found in the various regions of the Empire. The Sotho are included in his examination of the "native races," which includes descriptions of physique, traditions and beliefs.

There are also several authors who served within the region in various capacities. Leopold Marquard, who worked for the Army Education Services in South Africa, published a number of books on the region. The most notable was the text *The Peoples and Policies of South Africa*, from 1969. This book provides a detailed history of the general population of South Africa based on advances into the interior by both the English and Afrikaner (Boer) populations. It largely focuses on relations between the Boers and the British and attempts to link many contemporary political conditions with past events. A good source, it highlights the pattern of white South Africa's desire to retain political control and the African desire for freedom. This text was helpful in establishing the basis for land disputes within the region, and outlines a history of advances upon Sotho land. This volume complements the earlier works of George McCall Theal, who was appointed by the Cape government in 1879 to collect, examine and index the archives of the colony. His two works, *Catalogue of Books and Pamphlets Relating to Africa South of the Zambesi (1913)*, and *A Fragment of Basuto History, 1854-1919 (1886)*, proved quite valuable in gaining contextual insights into Basotho culture. The former work is simply a catalogue of any and all books containing any information on the Sotho. It goes without saying that this book is an excellent source for finding authors and literary works specific to this area of research. The latter title focuses on the war of 1865 between the Sotho and the Free State, as well as the events leading up to it. It examines land agreements and dealings between the cultures, as well as Basotho law and relations. Again, it was a valuable source in contextualizing the events throughout the

periods covered, as well as emphasizing the relationship and beliefs surrounding the Sotho and their land.

Finally, military historian Major Geoffrey Tylden, who was a member and key researcher for the Society for Army Historical Research, added a number of works through his military position. His main text relating to the history of the Sotho is entitled *The Rise of the Basuto (1950)*, and it provided additional historical information regarding the history of the Sotho, beginning with the 1920's. However, he also penned an interesting article for the *South African Archaeological Bulletin* entitled "Bantu Shields." This article, which was first published in 1946, examines the shield types found among the various people groups in South Africa. It highlights the Early and Late Basotho type, explaining how and why they differ from others within the country, as well as how they were constructed. In addition, he gives evidence of these specific types being found in early cave paintings, establishing the presence of the Sotho people in the region prior to written records. This article offers some interesting facts about the craftsmanship of shields among the Sotho people, and suggests the presence of a strong visual culture within the society.

In an attempt to find a number of perspectives within the historical accounts used in this study, I also located a number of sources from travelers and other individuals who did not necessarily hold any vested interests in the portrayal of the subject matter at hand. One of these individuals was James Backhouse. Arriving in Cape Town in June 1838, he traveled about the majority of the inhabited districts of South Africa until December

1840. His book, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa*, from 1844, provides detailed descriptions of Sotho clothing and jewelry, as well as highlighting customs and belief systems. Although his descriptions of the Sotho are quite helpful, this book was especially valuable in describing the arts of the culture in the mid-19th century.

Another author of this sort was Dr. Emil Holub, who served as a surgeon at the Kimberly diamond fields from 1872. On several occasions, Holub used the money earned from his practice and undertook expeditions into the surrounding regions. While traveling, he made extensive natural history collections and recorded meticulous details of the people and objects that he came across. In his seminal work, *Seven Years in South Africa*, which was first published in 1881, Holub makes mention of the Sotho, and offers a few insights into the culture. Although his writing on the Sotho is rather limited, this two volume series offers insights into the groups with whom he interacts, thus adding context to the facts presented.

Adding to these historical references, several recent art historical texts offer some insight on the art of southern Africa and the Sotho. First and foremost, Gary van Wyk's book, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*, proved to be valuable to this study in a number of ways.⁴ Not only does he present a sound political and cultural history of the Sotho people, but his text includes countless images of Sotho

⁴ van Wyk's book was first published in 1998.

murals. The images, along with the information related to color use and form, present ideas that can be applied to the other art forms of the Sotho culture.

In addition to this book, there are two exhibition catalogues that provided further insight into the art of the Sotho. Sandra Klopper and Karel Nel wrote their text, *The Art of Southeast Africa*, based on the Conru collection of Bruxelles.⁵ This book discusses art objects of Southern Africa, with a large focus upon works from peoples living in the modern nation of South Africa. The images include a number of Sotho art objects, and the accompanying essays provide both a historical overview of the different cultures of the region, as well as insights regarding the production and consumption of their arts. The other source, *Art and Ambiguity*, is a perspective on the Brenthurst Collection of Southern African art.⁶ This catalogue provides a number of Sotho images, and offers further insight into the context of the objects at hand. It also includes essays by several art historians, which focus on such issues as tradition, authenticity and classification.

Finally, there were two books that I came across which were unlike any of the preceding texts, yet proved to be quite valuable. The first is a fictional work from 1973 by Sotho writer Thomas Mofolo, entitled *The Traveler of the East*. Although this source was primarily a work of creative writing, it offered great insights into the modern worldview of the Sotho. This text provided a point of view from a different context, and integrated many of the aforementioned objects, beliefs and cultural norms that were

⁵ *The Art of Southeast Africa* was published in 2002.

⁶ *Art and Ambiguity*, which accompanied an exhibition of the same name, was published in 1991.

outlined in the historical works, thus creating a new frame of reference. The other source was entitled *Women, Art and Geometry in Southern Africa*, by mathematician Dr. Paulus Gerdes.⁷ Although this book focuses on mathematical theory in design, it offered some insights into the formation of Sotho patterns and motifs. In addition, it included a section on Sotho mural arts, and provided numerous related images.

iii. Review of the Object Collections

The extant works of Sotho art described by these sources are central to this study. Although I was able to visit only one of these collections first hand (The National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa), I was able to get an idea of the number and type of Sotho pieces currently housed around the world. Of the numerous institutions contacted, the British Museum in London seemed to hold the most numerous works of Sotho art. Unfortunately, at the time of my research the Ethnography department was involved in packing for their move into their new Centre for Anthropology. While the curatorial staff was not in a position to address my inquiries, I was able to obtain a listing of the material in their collections from Lesotho. The list proved to be quite valuable, in that it not only revealed the number and type of objects held, but also included valuable data in regards to dates and locations of each acquisition. Interestingly enough, a number

⁷ *Women, Art and Geometry in Southern Africa* was published in 1998.

of the objects were obtained from high ranking Sotho officials, as well as from researchers and private collectors. In all, the British Museum stores over 500 well documented objects which included a range of personal objects such as clothing and walking staffs, snuff containers and forged weapons.

The next largest collection in terms of sheer volume is housed at the Field Museum in Chicago. In all, the Museum lists approximately 600 objects from South Africa. Of this number, 20 are listed as Basotho. The collection includes the following object types: 1 bag, 1 tray, 4 cat tail garments, 7 skin karosses, 6 axes and 1 musical bow.⁸ The remainder of the collection boasts of 260 items which have no cultural affiliation listed, as well as 35 items listed simply as “Southern Africa.” Thus, a large portion of the collection remains to be properly identified in its relation to specific cultural association. Along these same lines is the collection of the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen Scotland. Although the Museum held 3 objects that were listed as being found in Lesotho or a recorded place in South Africa, the majority of their collection were simply listed as “Southern Africa,” with no accompanying details of locale or origin.

The Smithsonian Institute also provided a number of examples from two of their museums. The Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History possesses 7 Sotho items, which include a “fertility doll,” thumb piano, shirt, scarf and 3 hats.⁹ The accompanying information regarding these objects provided a limited amount

⁸ A kaross is a type of sleeveless jacket made of animal hide, usually with the hair left on.

⁹ See page 60 and fig. 51 for an example of Sotho dolls.

of data, but includes a relatively good description of the objects for each entry. The National Museum of African Art also provided a few objects related to this study. In all, the Museum owns 6 Sotho objects, and I was able to obtain images and remarks for all of them. The collection includes a beaded gourd vessel, a smoking pipe, 3 horn snuff containers and a “battle axe.” Interestingly enough, the object types found at the National Museum of African Art were similar to those found among the other institutions, yet they are regarded elsewhere as objects of ethnography or anthropology rather than art works.

Finally, as should be expected, a number of museums in South Africa provided ample information related to their Sotho holdings. Both the McGregor Museum in Kimberly and the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria have large collections of Sotho objects, the specifics of which I have not been able to obtain thus far. However, National Cultural History Museum was glad to inform me that the collection housed contains a large amount of well documented objects and photos, which have never been studied or published in any detail.

The best assistance came from the other two institutions that I contacted regarding my research. First, the Albany Museum in Grahamstown proved to be quite valuable. Although the holdings were limited (18 bracelets, 2 belts, 1 strainer, 3 sculpted ceramic animal figures, 4 necklaces, 1 ostrich egg wrapped in metal, 2 woven reed masks, 1 walking stick and 2 snuffboxes), the curators were quite accommodating in addressing my questions. The “Museum Human Scientist” in the anthropology department, Mpho

Jeffrey Molapisi, went to great lengths in providing me with details regarding the collection, and many specifics related to particular objects.

The last collection for which I obtained information was at the National Museum in Bloemfontein. I chose this collection as my primary source for formal analysis, and spent a day with Dr. Zoë Henderson of the Archaeology Department photographing and examining the objects within the collection. The museum has an extensive Sotho collection, which provided me with a wealth of both images and raw data related to the works at hand. As the capital of the Free State province, Bloemfontein seemed the most logical location to visit, as this province borders the country of Lesotho, and encompasses the locale of lands that were formerly under Sotho rule. In addition, the Free State currently sustains a large population of Sotho speaking individuals, and is the locale of the former Sotho homeland under the apartheid system of government. My visit proved fruitful on a number of levels, and provided me with nearly all of the images discussed in the formal analysis section of this paper.



Figure 1 - A view of 42nd Hill near Harrismith, South Africa. Personal photo of the author, 2001.



Figure 2 - Eugene Casalis, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 67.



Figure 3 - *Thomas Arbousset*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 68.

Chapter II. Outline of Basotho Political History

Lesotho, with an area of 11,720 square miles, is completely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. Today, approximately 2.3 million Basotho live in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho while another 3 million live in the Republic of South Africa.¹⁰ The majority of the Sotho in South Africa reside in the Orange Free State Province which

¹⁰ Baptist Mission in Lesotho and South Africa. *The Basotho of Southern Africa*, <<http://www.basotho.org/info.htm>> (1 October, 2005), Ilesotho.

borders Lesotho.¹¹ Presently, the country has a king (King Letsie III), a prime minister and a Parliament composed of elected representatives and customary chiefs.

Before examining the art history of the Sotho people, it is important to understand the language used when referring to a member or members of this culture. Southern Sotho (Sesotho) is one of the official languages of South Africa and is a member of the Bantu/Nguni family of languages. In Sesotho, the nouns are divided into various noun classes. The noun class determines the subject prefix. For example, the term Sotho is used when speaking about the culture as a whole. Basotho refers to the plural, and may be understood as meaning “the Sotho people,” or “The people of Lesotho,” making the expression “the Basotho people” redundant. Furthermore, a single individual, such as a Sotho man, would be referred to as a Mosotho, with the Mo- prefix identifying the noun as singular. Finally, the prefix on the aforementioned term Sesotho refers to “the language of the Sotho.” Thus, the terms Sotho and Basotho, although appearing to be different, may be used interchangeably depending on sentence tense.

According to the early accounts of Casalis and Ashton, and later writings by British anthropologist Austin Coates, the Sotho are said to have stemmed from Mopeli (or Tlake) Mosito (sinner), the first man. The nature of his fault is not known, but the idea offers a parallel to the Biblical idea of original sin.¹² This man’s origin is based around two different stories. The first states that human beings and animals alike sprang from the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Austin Coates, *Basutoland* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1966), 7.

bowels of the earth.¹³ In this version, it is believed that all earthly animals appeared first, followed by humankind. This idea of a hole or cavern leading underground is reflected in the religious practices of the Sotho, as the underground is believed to be the dwelling place of the ancestors.¹⁴ The relationship between the earth and ancestors gives credence to this version of the creation story, as the underground is represented as a spiritual realm. Another version, held by the majority of Basotho, centers on a location named Ntsoanatsatsi (Ntsuanatsatsi) as the place of origin.¹⁵ The site, located near the modern towns of Vrede and Frankfort in the Free State province, holds archaeological evidence of Sotho occupation since the 1600's, lending credibility to the narrative.¹⁶ In this account, the first man emerged from a reed bed found at this location, from which all true Basotho have descended from.¹⁷ Again, religious practice supports this version. After a child is born, a reed is fastened above the dwelling of the new mother, announcing the new birth, and reiterating the idea of humans being born of a reed bed.¹⁸ Oddly enough, this story offers a close parallel to Biblical accounts of the Exodus, when a child (Moses)

¹³ Eugene Casalis, *The Basutos* (Moriya: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997), 240. Originally published in 1861, this is a 1997 facsimile.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁵ Thomas Mofolo, *The Traveler of the East* (Nendeln: Kraus-Thomson Organization, Ltd., 1973), 36.

¹⁶ Gary N. van Wyk, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 102.

¹⁷ Casalis, *The Basutos*, 240; and Edmund Hugh Ashton, *The Basuto: A Social Study of Traditional and Modern Lesotho* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 10.

¹⁸ Casalis, 241.

was hidden in the rushes of the Nile River.¹⁹ Furthermore, Sotho women veil their faces with reed masks during initiation, referring back to the idea of birth, or re-birth, from this account.²⁰

Western observers sought an alternate origin for the Sotho. This Western approach, although shared by authors such as Casalis, Lagden, Widdicombe and Ellenberger, must be prefaced with a caveat. One must not overlook the fact that these histories are seen through Western eyes, and shaped by attitudes and ambitions according to the slant of their vision. They developed a theory of migration, which centers on all groups stemming from the general classification of population known as Bantu. This 19th century pseudo-ethnic term refers to the hundreds of linguistically interrelated cultures who were indiscriminately grouped as having a common race, culture and history.²¹ According to this concept, which was widely accepted in the writings of the aforementioned early authors, the Bantu-speaking peoples were newcomers. This placed their arrival in South Africa at a period conveniently coinciding with the arrival of the Dutch.

Anthropologists generally believe that the Bantu language groups have gradually settled the greater part of the African continent from Nigeria and Cameroon across to the

¹⁹ Ashton, 11.

²⁰ van Wyk, 117.

²¹ Martin Hall, *Farmers, Kings, and Traders: The People of Southern Africa, 200-1860* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 20.

Great Lakes of East Africa, and then South.²² The ancestors of the Bantu groups migrated south from the equatorial regions of the continent where they merged with earlier Southern African groups.²³ Although modern theories abound as to why these communities moved south, including the cultivation of root crops and the development of domestic stock, modern-day archaeologists believe these migrations would eventually bring these clans to the banks of the Zambezi by the beginning of the Christian Era, nearly 2,000 years ago.²⁴ Archaeological evidence for the longevity of Bantu speaking peoples in southern Africa is provided by the intricate terra-cotta sculptures from the fifth century site of Lydenburg and complex architectural styles and plans as are found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe (13-15th C. AD) (Fig. 4, 5).²⁵

Over the last two millennia, the Southern Bantu clans have broken into three distinct groups, and began forming settled agricultural and pastoral communities throughout the northern region of modern-day South Africa. Ancestors of the Bechuana settled on the high Western tablelands, and those of the Damara and Ovambo groups settled on the West coast, both areas of which were arid and better suited for livestock

²² Hall, 13; John Widdicombe, *Fourteen Years in Basutoland* (London: The Church Printing Company, 1891), 15; Casalis, *The Basutos*, xvii; and Sir Godfrey Yeatman Lagden, *The Basutos: The Mountaineers & Their Country* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 7. The latter was originally published in 1909.

²³ Hall, 23; and D. Frederic Ellenberger, 11.

²⁴ Hall, 21-22; and Victor Ellenberger, *A Century of Mission Work in Basutoland, 1833-1933* (Moriya: Sesuto Book Depot, 1938), 10.

²⁵ Hall, 1-2.

herding supplemented by hunting.²⁶ In contrast, the forerunners of the Zulu-Xhosa chose the East coast, which sustained an annual rainfall that allowed for crop cultivation and mixed farming communities.²⁷ John Widdicombe recorded that the Sotho themselves believed that the first Bantu groups in South Africa were comprised of the Phetla, Polane and Phuthi.²⁸ These groups were later joined by the first Basotho clans: the Peli, Phuthing, Sia, and Tlokoa (Ma’Ntatisi, Sekonyela), who arrived from the north-eastern margins of the grasslands and the headwaters of the Limpopo River.²⁹ Former Bechuanaland Assistant Colonial Administrator Edmund Hugh Ashton suggests that a distinction must be made between these clans and those not originally Basotho, namely the Nguni known as Matebele (Phetla, Polane, Phuti) and those known as Bathepu (Mahlape, Fingoes, Pondoos, Thembu).³⁰ By the 17th century, the Sotho extended south from the south-central and western Transvaal of South Africa, just north of modern-day Pretoria.³¹ At this time, a further division took place as the Northern Basotho moved down into the Transvaal, and the Southern Basotho ventured onward toward the Orange River and its tributaries, near modern day Vrede in the Free State.³² At this point, the

²⁶ Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 10; and Hall, 34.

²⁷ Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 10; and Hall, 34.

²⁸ Widdicombe, 13.

²⁹ Hall, 53; and Widdicombe, 13.

³⁰ Ashton, 11.

³¹ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 46; Stephen J. Gill, introduction to *The Basutos*, by Eugene Casalis (Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997), 10; and Widdicombe, 17.

³² Allan Carpenter and Tom Balow, *Lesotho* (Chicago: Children’s Press, 1975), 25; and Gill, 10-11.

Southern Basotho clans settled in the vicinity of modern day Lesotho, inhabiting the major river valleys of the central, northern and eastern parts of the region.³³

As they entered into this area, these various clans (Bakwena, Bamonaheng, Batlokoana, Baramokhele, Makhoakoa, Mayiane, and later Batlokoa, Bateng, hereby referred to as Basotho) are thought to have interacted with the San, an indigenous hunter/gathering people residing in the area.³⁴ The Sotho are believed to have driven out the San, leaving themselves in the region, along with the Zulu (Matebele) and Fingoe.³⁵ Of the numerous Basotho clans, the Bakwena (people of the crocodile) soon became recognized as the most powerful branch, and would eventually become the ruling cast.³⁶ Prior to the arrival of the French missionaries, Morena Mohlomi, a Bakwena chief, doctor and wise man, was able to unify these various clans, creating a unified nation, and elevating himself to the status of King.³⁷ Although Mohlomi would die in 1814, causing the clans to scatter, his political ideas would influence the future of the Sotho nation.³⁸

In addition to his legendary status, Mohlomi is an interesting figure based on his conflict with cultural belief systems. I would go so far to argue that he was to the Sotho what Akhenaton was to the Egyptians of Amarna period Kemet. Mohlomi was outspoken

³³ Gill, 11; and Lagden, *Basutos*, 43.

³⁴ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 37; and Lagden, *Basutos* 43.

³⁵ Widdicombe, 14.

³⁶ Lagden, *Basutos* 43.

³⁷ Gill, 11; and Widdicombe, 20.

³⁸ Widdicombe, 20.

in his disbelief of the diviners (banganga), and openly challenged their abilities.³⁹ He sought to free the Sotho from the fear that these priests and doctors used in order to keep their place in society secure, as well as financially lucrative. These defiant acts often brought crowds from the region that would come to hear him speak. Although this spirit of independence served a political function, it may have extended onto Basotho visual culture as well. For example, one can distinguish the works created by a Sotho ceramic artist from those created by artists of other neighboring cultures by examining her technique in creating pottery.⁴⁰ Thus, this idea of independence not only assists in re-introducing the political history of the Sotho, but the art history as well.

It was in the capital city of Butha-Buthe, that Mohlomi prophesized greatness in the future of Lepoqo, a petty chief of little rank.⁴¹ Although the exact location of his birth is debated, Lepoqo was recorded as being born in 1786 to Morena Mokhachane, a minor chief of the Bamokoteli branch of the Bakoena clan.⁴² At the time of his birth, the region of modern day Lesotho was quite populous and the Monahing clan, of which he was a

³⁹ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 95; and Gill, 11.

⁴⁰ A. C. Lawton's text *Bantu Pottery of Southern Africa* details the different sculptural techniques found among the numerous cultures of southern Africa. Sotho pottery is created by female artists. See Ashton, 160; D. Frederic Ellenberger, 294; Lagden, *Basutos*, 13; and Widdicombe, 50.

⁴¹ Thomas Arbousset, *Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains: Being an Account of King Moshoeshoe's Expedition from Thaba-Bosiu to the Sources of the Malibamatso River in the Year 1840* (Moriya: Morija Archives, 1991), 111. Arbousset's account was originally written in 1840; Widdicombe, 22; Coates, 17.

⁴² Gill, 12; and Widdicombe, 21. Lepoqo is recorded by Stephen Gill as being born at Menkhoaneng in the present day Leribe district. John Widdicombe lists the location as Dinohuameng on the Thlotse (Tlotsi) river.

representative, was supreme.⁴³ However, it was a time of political unrest as each chief in the region was striving for hegemony.⁴⁴ Originally named Lepoqo (dispute), marking the political unrest at the time of his birth, his name was changed to Tlaputle (the energetic) at his circumcision.⁴⁵ He would later earn the name Moshoeshoe (the shaver) for his acts of valor where he stole cattle from Ramoneheng (Ramohato, Letlama), a rival.⁴⁶ This action was quite significant, due to the importance of cattle in Sotho culture. Cattle signified wealth, and these independent chiefs held great wealth, which in turn signified power. This importance is reflected in the visual culture of the Sotho, as both cattle motifs and materials, such as the hide and horns, are commonly found in Basotho prestige objects such as snuff containers and personal ornaments (Fig 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).⁴⁷

Around 1825 Moshoeshoe established himself at Thaba Bosigo, and was the recognized leader over the Sotho clans by 1831, save the Tlako of the West (Fig. 11).⁴⁸ By 1833, the time of the arrival of Eugene Casalis and the French missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS), the Sotho, under the leadership of

⁴³ Casalis, 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Widdicombe, 21.

⁴⁶ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 107. Moshoeshoe earned this name by stealing cattle from Ramoneheng. The reference to “the shaver” is linked to the idea that he “shaved the beard” off of his rival by taking his wealth in cattle.

⁴⁷ One may also note the presence of such related objects in the aforementioned collections of the British Museum, the Field Museum, the National Museum of African Art, the McGregor Museum, the National Cultural History Museum, the Albany Museum and the National Museum, Bloemfontein.

⁴⁸ Ashton, 3; and Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 11.

Moshoeshoe, were starting to reconstruct their national life following the devastation of the invasions from the Zulu of Natal.⁴⁹ At this time, Moshoeshoe's power and influence had grown and was beginning to spread over all of the fragments of the old Basotho clans.⁵⁰ During his reign as King, he is said to have had 20,000 people living under his direct rule.⁵¹ He is said to have died on March 11 or 12, 1870, leaving his son, Letsie, as the next king.⁵²

The history of the Sotho develops through a series of military victories and defeats, alongside the steady movement of European immigrants into the interior of southern Africa. In the early 19th century there were few feuds among the peoples of the region and little bloodshed.⁵³ However, this relative stability came to an end when the competition for trade monopolies among the coastal North Nguni peoples came to a head in 1818.⁵⁴ At this time, the famous Chaka of the Zulu drove his vassal Mateoane from Natal, using innovative military strategies. This began a chain reaction, putting Pakalita's Fingoes to flight, who in turn fell upon the Mantatis to the northwest.⁵⁵ The Mantatis, who were residing in the northwestern region of modern day Natal, were driven into

⁴⁹ Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 21; and Widdicombe, 40.

⁵³ Casalis, 16.

⁵⁴ van Wyk., 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Fingoes (Mfengu) were a group living in the Natal province of South Africa who spoke a Xhosa language -one of the Bantu languages. The Mfengu became refugees from the lifaqane in Natal, who made their way to the eastern Cape, where they were succored by local chiefs.

Lesotho, causing the independent Sotho clans to scatter. Although the motivations behind this time of catastrophe, known as the lifaqane, are disputed, no one can deny the devastation left in its wake.⁵⁶ As Chaka ruthlessly crushed his opponents, many of them turned to raiding, using the military tactics they had developed on the coast. Thus, a chain reaction took place, as settled communities in turn were wiped out, or forced to become raiders themselves.

In 1822 the Sotho were ruined by the Zulu, and further scattered by Matebele and Koranna armies in the years following. However, it was this very chain reaction of displacement that eventually allowed Moshoeshoe to gather the remnants of many groups into the Sotho polity.⁵⁷ It was at this time that Moshoeshoe retreated from Botha-Bothe and took up position at Thaba Bosigo (Mountain of the Night).⁵⁸ Upon arriving, Moshoeshoe set up khotla, an architectural term referring to a spatial gathering place of men which serves an official purpose as the place of the king's council and governance, and became known as "Chief of the Mountain." The establishment of the khotla gave rise to the production of Sotho architecture, which Casalis described in his 1833 text, *The*

⁵⁶ Although one line of thought places Chaka, and his desire for a trade monopoly with the Portuguese at Maputo, there are other motivating factors within the region that may have ignited such a time of distress. The encroachment of British immigrants created a buffer zone to the east between the Cape Colony and the Xhosa of the interior. Although the majority of English immigrants (5,000) arrived at Port Elizabeth in 1820, small scale movements into the interior may have started the displacement process.

⁵⁷ Widdicombe, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

Basutos.⁵⁹ Although the presence and influence of the European missionaries would eventually impact the form of Sotho houses, Casalis was careful to complete several etchings of Basotho homes and settlements, creating a visual record of Sotho building technique.

Within the impregnable location of Thaba Bosigo, Moshoeshoe began to assert his power as chief, first defeating the Baputi in 1825. After this victory, the Baputi acknowledged Moshoeshoe as their king, alerting the attention of Chaka.⁶⁰ However, Moshoeshoe sent karosses and ostrich feathers to the Zulu king as a gesture of good will in order to prevent any hostilities.⁶¹ Again, the significance of the materials used in Sotho visual culture came into play with this exchange. Not only are the karosses linked with ideas of wealth and prestige, due to the use of cattle hide in their production, but Sotho artists were renowned for their exquisite tailor work.⁶² Furthermore, ostrich feathers often embellished the uppermost reaches of both Sotho and Zulu shields.⁶³ By offering the finest garments in the region, as well as military materials, Moshoeshoe was able to pacify the Zulu king. Following this interaction, Moshoeshoe strategically established himself at Thaba Bosiu, a naturally guarded mountain nearby the former site of Thaba Bosigo, where he was able to hold off all attacking forces (Fig. 12).

⁵⁹ Casalis, 125.

⁶⁰ Widdicombe, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶³ Casalis, 63, 136; and Major G. Tylden, "Bantu Shields," *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 1(2) March 1946: 33.

Although Moshoeshoe wore the normal Sotho attire while on his mountain, it is said that his clothing changed whenever he departed his town. He was known to possess several chests of European clothing that he wore when off the mountain (Fig. 13, 14).⁶⁴ One observer notes his attire as the following: white socks, Carter's shoes (which were European luxury items), velvet trousers, a striped green waistcoat, homespun jacket, tie, sash, belt and a blue cotton hat from a soldier of St. Helena.⁶⁵ This is a great contrast to the Sotho attire that artists were producing at this time, which consisted of animal hide and sinews, some of which were embellished with freehand incised designs.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Moshoeshoe was observed at times carrying a gun, and usually had two assegais with him.⁶⁷ He always carried a bamboo lance & powder horn across his chest.⁶⁸ He is said to have many European style clothes in a wardrobe, hinting at the value attributed to such prestige items, and making visual statements about his bicultural abilities.⁶⁹ This can be compared to the contemporary example of Nelson Mandela, who has appeared in public settings wearing Xhosa clothing as a way to make similar visual statements (Fig. 15). Moshoeshoe even possessed English vessels for drinking and

⁶⁴ James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1844), 368.

⁶⁵ Arbousset, 123.

⁶⁶ Casalis, 134.

⁶⁷ Arbousset, 123., Although a term derived from the Portuguese *azagaia*, an assegai is a slender spear made of wood and pointed with iron, used by the Sotho and other groups in Southern Africa classified as Bantu.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 138.

serving tea.⁷⁰ These observations alone cue us in on the impact of European culture upon the Sotho king, as well as reinforce the fact that visual language was a central concept in Sotho society.⁷¹

Aside from the political and social formation of the Sotho nation, relations with the newly established colonial forces had a great impact on the Sotho culture as a whole. As time progressed, and the Boer (Afrikaans) farmers began to expand within the area, Moshoeshe allowed random families to settle on his land.⁷² Local chiefs looked upon the Boers as sojourners, and were even prepared to grant them temporary grazing rights.⁷³ Even Moshoeshe saw the Boer presence in a positive light, as they may have presented a possible counter to any threats from other hostile groups.⁷⁴ However, it is at this point that we begin to see the first signs of struggle that will mar the relations of these groups for years to come. Although Moshoeshe seemingly allowed these Western individuals to settle within his kingdom, the Boers did not understand the Sotho concept of land ownership. Unbeknownst to them, private ownership was impossible in Sotho culture.⁷⁵ Rather, the king holds possession of all land on behalf of his subjects. In addition to this,

⁷⁰ Backhouse, 371.

⁷¹ Also note that Sotho soldiers wore specific regalia which identified them as such from a distance.

⁷² Backhouse, 52.

⁷³ Paul Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa: from the Early Iron Age to the 1970s*. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1986), 113.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ van Wyk, 68.

it is understood by the Sotho that the earth is the home of the ancestors.⁷⁶ By giving up rights to land, the Sotho would in essence be forsaking the spirits of the past who play a central role in the provision and maintenance of daily life. Furthermore, the architecture created throughout the region also played an aesthetic and religious role in relation to the ancestors. By erecting houses throughout the region and decorating them with murals, the Sotho were in essence creating altars to these spirits of the past, and ensuring their livelihood for the future.⁷⁷ Thus, division of land was an offense. Due to this difference in perception, there would be countless major disputes over land rights between the Sotho and Boers from 1830 through 1860.⁷⁸

Finally, in 1839 Moshoeshoe could not turn a blind eye on the encroachments by these new settlers. He appealed to Sir George Napier, governor of the Cape Colony, and eventually gained British protection in 1842 through diplomatic relations with the Empire.⁷⁹ However, this would only prove to be the calm before the storm. In 1848, new governor of the Cape, Sir Harry Smith, would attempt to squelch the unrest between the Sotho and Boer populations within the region by attacking and annexing the territory.⁸⁰ Despite a failed military campaign of six years, Governor Smith proclaimed British

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁹ Casalis, 19; Lagden, *Basutos*, 46; and Widdicombe, 32.

⁸⁰ Casalis, 21.

sovereignty over both Basotholand and the Boer republic of the Orange Free State.⁸¹

Soon after this proclamation, a line was drawn to separate the legal boundaries of the two parties. Known as the Warden line, this solution not only left the Sotho with less and less territory, but did not solve any of the past disputes, and eventually led to the censure and removal of Governor Smith.⁸²

Under his successor, Sir George Cathcart, the British immediately went to war with the Sotho. Interestingly enough, the material culture of the Sotho played a great part in regards to the art of war. Although the personal uniform of the Sotho soldier varied from individual to individual, Casalis describes the specific regalia worn for war, as well as the performance arts linked with the preparation for battle.⁸³ Furthermore, the visual nature of the Sotho military uniform, including the unique form of Sotho shields, allowed one to be identified at a distance as belonging to this group.⁸⁴

In the end, the Sotho defense would prove to be superior over the British forces, and governor Cathcart would have no success in invading Basotholand.⁸⁵ After this great embarrassment, the British withdrew in 1854.⁸⁶ The Sotho still faced an ongoing struggle with the Boers, which would rise to a new level when President Brand of the Orange Free

⁸¹ Casalis, 21; and Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 73.

⁸² Victor Ellenberger, *Century of Mission Work*, 76; and Sir Godfrey Yeatman Lagden, *The Native Races of the Empire* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1924), 17.

⁸³ Casalis, 61-63.

⁸⁴ Tylden, 33.

⁸⁵ Lagden, *Native Races*, 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

State would declare war on Basotholand. By this time, more than half of Basotholand had been usurped by the Orange Free State.⁸⁷ However, the rising power of the Boer Republic would again gain the attention of the British government, which intervened in 1868, declaring the Sotho to be British subjects under the control of the Cape Colony.⁸⁸

The British hoped to unite their colonies of Natal and the Cape with the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Free State. However, the Boers would never agree to the unification if the African societies had access to guns.⁸⁹ This led to one of the most notable events in Sotho history, as the Cape government attempted to disarm the Sotho nation.⁹⁰ What would be later known as the Gun War ensued, in which the Cape colony again found itself unable to gain victory over the Sotho.⁹¹ The Sotho became the only black nation in South Africa who retained their weapons.⁹² Their ability to stand against the preeminent colonial power in Southern Africa, while remaining relatively intact only points to the strength and resilience of this independent group.

As the 20th century arrived, the Sotho would find these past issues brought to the forefront once again. Although Britain won the struggle for control of the region through the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), the Afrikaner Nationalist Party would come to power in South Africa in 1948, with its philosophy of apartheid. This system of government,

⁸⁷ Casalis, 23.

⁸⁸ van Wyk, 19.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁹⁰ Lagden, *Native Races*, 47.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² van Wyk, 73.

which sharpened ethnic boundaries through political, social and economic discrimination and segregation against nonwhites, continued on for nearly half a century. Although in 1966 Basotholand was given independence from Britain and renamed Lesotho, the tragedies going on in neighboring South Africa would have a great impact on the Sotho. The Afrikaner government established exploitative state sanctioned labor conditions which directly impacted the Sotho, whose migrant workers made up 77% of the population in the Free State.⁹³ As political and social tensions began to peak through the mid-eighties, due to large-scale protests and international sanctions, a State of Emergency was declared in 36 magisterial districts. Five years later, the State government began negotiations with the previously banned African National Congress (ANC), a political party serving the black majority, for the removal of apartheid. Finally in 1994, nearly fifty years after Afrikaner rule, the first all-race elections were held, inaugurating Nelson Mandela as President.

i. Contextualizing the Arts in Relation to the History and Literature

Although the literature reviewed to construct this historic framework offers a concise view of the development of the Sotho nation, it is important to apply this information to the works of art themselves. Although readily present in the historical

⁹³ Ibid., 32.

accounts, modern scholars must venture beneath the surface in order to grasp the ideas linked to Sotho art by these early authors. The information gathered seems to focus on anthropological analysis and discovery, rather than an exploration of the Sotho culture in all aspects. However, this should come as no surprise. One must keep in mind the context in which these accounts were recorded, as well as the climate in which the information was gathered. Throughout the nineteenth century, colonialism was still at the forefront of national ambitions across the African continent. The scholars clearly were seeking information related to the reach of a benevolent empire which offered hope to the “lower” cultures and societies to be exposed to Western development and thought. The possibility that African cultures could produce art was not considered. Furthermore, these individuals, coming from “civilized” nations, were already conditioned with ideas of what “art” should be – such as the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough and neoclassical monuments of sculpture and architecture. Thus, none of the authors included pots, plaited textiles and utilitarian objects in their definition of “art.” The lack of discussion of Sotho art in their accounts was not due to a lack of quantity or quality of visual culture in the region. Rather, it was due to the worldview of a group of observers who were unfamiliar with the methods by which to approach a piece of Sotho art. It was only in the latter part of the twentieth century that the development and study of African art brought these overlooked forms into a new light, allowing them to be seen on an aesthetic plane.⁹⁴ In

⁹⁴ For further discussion on the positioning of “visual culture” as “art,” see Suzanne Blier in Monica Blackmun Visonà, et al., *A History of Art in Africa* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 14-23.

lieu of the historical deficiencies, I am approaching Basotho objects as works of art. Sotho objects clearly fit into a general aesthetic, and have specific meaning within the cultural context. In essence, Sotho works of art are part of a larger cultural complex, which I hope to fully realize throughout this study. In addition, although modern art historians have focused on aspects of Basotho art, there has yet to be a study which focuses on Sotho art as a whole.⁹⁵ Thus, I will be building upon the concepts of these art historians in order to capture an overall view of Sotho aesthetics.

Exhibition catalogues such as *The Art of Southeast Africa* and *Art and Ambiguity* include Sotho objects among other works of art, and Gary van Wyk's book *African Painted Houses* features Sotho mural arts and architecture.

⁹⁵ Examples include van Wyk's text on Sotho architecture and mural painting. Sotho objects are included within an overall survey of art from southern Africa in Monica Blackmun Visonà's *A History of Art in Africa*, as well as the exhibition catalogue by Sandra Klopper and Karel Nel, *The Art of Southeast Africa and Art and Ambiguity*, which includes chapters by Klopper and Anitra Nettleton.

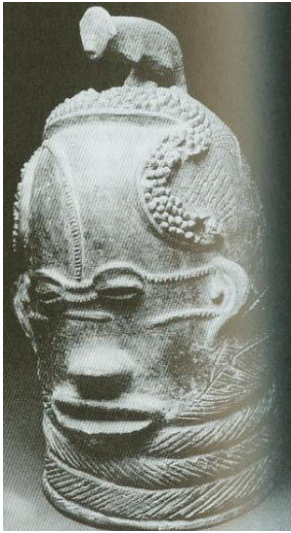


Figure 4 - *Lydenburg Head*, from Visonà, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Art in Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001. P. 478.



Figure 5 - *Tower and Inner Wall, Great Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe*, from Visonà, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Art in Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001. P.481.



Figure 6 - *Snuff Container* from Visonà, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Art in Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001. P.488.

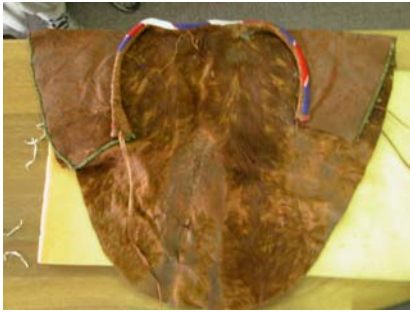


Figure 7 - *A leather kaross with beaded collar*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 8 - *Brass Collars*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 9 - *Beaded Panel, 0.3089*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 10 - *Beadwork Panels*, from Klopper, Sandra and Karel Nel. *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002. P. 69.



Figure 11 - *Moshoeshoe in 1833*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 15.



Figure 12 - *Thaba Bosiu*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 81.



Figure 13 - *Moshoeshoe*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 61.



Figure 14 - *Moshoeshoe*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 69.



Figure 15 - *Nelson Mandela*, from Magubane, Peter and Sandra Klopper. *African Renaissance*. Cape Town: Struik Publishers, Ltd., 2000. P. 10.

Chapter III. Range of Forms

By gleaning the references to objects from existing literature, and paying close attention to the contexts in which Basotho art appears, a closer understanding of its meaning and place in Basotho society may be found. The earliest written sources reveal a large variety of forms, which gives scholars a starting point from which to examine the arts of the culture.

To begin, early writers have noted the presence of dance as a performing art in certain contexts among the Sotho (Casalis, 1833; Widdicombe, 1870's). Casalis recorded that performances were held for the community as a preparation for large scale conflict. As Casalis explains, the Sotho men would paint their faces in preparation for war, and would don specific regalia for the conflict (Fig. 16).⁹⁶ The soldiers would assemble wearing leopard skins on their shoulders and multi-colored plumes on their heads.⁹⁷ Once the men were gathered, a "war dance" would ensue, preparing the armed forces for battle through a lively display of rhythm and song.⁹⁸ This would create a multi-sensory event through movement, song and sound, exemplified to the smallest details of the military uniform. A central expression of this public performance is found in the complex prose of praise poetry. These praises, which are explained by Casalis to be inspired by the emotions of war or the chase, serve as a way to honor specific individuals and arouse the

⁹⁶ Casalis, 61.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁸ Widdicombe. 57.

emotions for the upcoming exploit.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the soldiers wore garlands of leathern bells, such as those found in the collection of the British Museum, which consisted of dried bags and stones, and served to accompany the performance.¹⁰⁰ In addition, glass beads and finely crafted copper rings were worn around the neck, arms and ankles in order to perpetuate the rhythms and assist the performers in excelling at their dance.¹⁰¹ Although there is no current research indicating whether these dances still exist today, it is possible that the activities linked with male initiation draw upon this tradition in terms of music, dance and adornment.¹⁰²

Sotho warriors were also noted to have worn objects of power, such as likonelo, which are essentially small packets of medicine (Fig. 17).¹⁰³ These amulets are said to have been suspended from girdles of glass beads or balls of wood, iron and copper, similar to the examples owned by the Albany and British Museums.¹⁰⁴ In the illustrations based upon Casalis' descriptions, one can see that these belts were often accompanied by a topknot ornament worn on the head, as well as copper earrings and an ivory bracelet, which were viewed as symbols of power.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Casalis, 328-9. Examples of Sotho prose such as the "War-Song of Goloane" and the "War-Song of Cucutle" can be found in chapter XVII of this text.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² For further discussion on male initiation practices, see van Wyk, 128-143; and Peter Magubane and Sandra Klopper. *African Renaissance*. (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, Ltd., 2000), p. 90-127.

¹⁰³ Arbousset, 108.

¹⁰⁴ Casalis, 152.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Aside from the performances linked with warfare, the Sotho used the body as a canvas in other ways. Sotho women were noted to have worn scent boxes made of tortoise shell. These boxes were suspended by a string and filled with the powder of odoriferous wood, giving off a scent which was highly esteemed.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, much like the Igbo of Nigeria, who paint intricate uli motifs, and the Luba of the Congo, who are known for creating scarification patterns, the Sotho possess a variety of bodily arts as an expression of their belief systems and aesthetic creativity.¹⁰⁷ During his tenure working under northern chief Molapo, Widdicombe noted the wide acceptance of what he described as tattooing, in addition to patterns created by daubing with red clay mixed with pig fat.¹⁰⁸ The applications of colored pigments are still used in a number of significant ceremonies, including the rite of passage into adulthood for both men and women. Tattooing was also observed by Backhouse in the mid-1830's, and was described as being found around the eyes and down the ridge of the nose of both male and female individuals.¹⁰⁹ However, scarification was much more prevalent, and is believed to be linked with specific meaning. Male members of the military order wore a specific scar that takes the shape of an upside-down "V."¹¹⁰ The mark, observed by Casalis in his primary text, was not given any coloring, but was simply rendered from a deep cut in the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Uli designs are indigo patterns painted on the visible parts of the body.

¹⁰⁸ Widdicombe, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Backhouse, 363.

¹¹⁰ Casalis, 151.

skin. This symbol was given in honor of an act of bravery, and was worn on the face, a site plainly visible to any onlooker.¹¹¹ The warriors wore it proudly, as it was a public symbol of their heroic actions.¹¹² While this artwork is created, friends often performed a dance around the man and boasted about his prowess in the form of the aforementioned praise poetry.¹¹³

Girls also distinguished themselves by a series of lines of the same manner around their eyes, down the cheeks and ending under chin, as was described by Casalis.¹¹⁴ After the operation, the ladies celebrated the momentous occasion by capturing a letsoka from a neighboring community.¹¹⁵ The letsoka is a stick upon which meat is turned in the cooking process. The young women would enter a neighboring community and capture the letsoka of a friend. Pursuit would be given by the friends who knew of the festivity linked with this occasion.¹¹⁶ At the dwelling of the “thieves,” the neighbors would come upon an ox which was prepared for all in celebration. The festival ensued with singing, dancing and a great feast to celebrate this honorable art form.¹¹⁷

Often accompanying the performance arts, the Sotho produced an overwhelming variety of musical instruments. A wide variety of Sotho instruments can be seen today at

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

the British Museum, as well as in the collection of the Field Museum, which owns a musical bow, and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, which possesses a Sotho thumb piano. The Sotho musical repertoire also includes drums consisting of sheepskin over a wooden or earthen ware pot (observed by Widdicombe in the 1870's), as well as a number of stringed instruments mounted on bamboo, such as the tomo which was played by striking a wand to the string which was stretched over a calabash (Fig. 18).¹¹⁸ There is further evidence of the manipulation of horns and bones from various antelope species, forming instruments such as the phola and phala, both of which appear in Arbousset's account from 1840.¹¹⁹ Horns such as these were often employed in public settings by the ngaka, or priest, as a preparation for war.¹²⁰ However, there seems to be another category of instruments that are related to specific activities outside of the performance arts. For example, young men living as shepherds are known to have developed several instruments specific to their occupation such as the stringed lesiba, and various reed pipes.¹²¹ Another example of private or personal instruments can be found in female initiation ceremonies. A certain form of clay pot covered with skin (morupa), was used during these important rites.¹²² Finally, the lekoko or seleupu consisted of a hand

¹¹⁸ Widdicombe, 58.

¹¹⁹ Arbousset, 125; 272.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 155.

¹²¹ Ashton, 37.

¹²² Ashton, 97.

rolled cow skin that was beaten with sticks, and used only for magekha séances, which were conducted by doctors in an attempt to communicate with ancestral spirits.¹²³

Although often regarded as anthropological artifacts, Sotho weaponry and forged instruments created for warfare can be considered art as well. Numerous pieces are owned by the British Museum, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art owns a Sotho axe, in which the artist combined the materials of wood and iron. Not only did these objects serve a utilitarian purpose, but they often served as markers of identity. For example, the distinctive Sotho axe illustrates rhythm and uniformity, as the crescent-shaped blade reflects the form of the attached curving staff (Fig. 19). In a time of widespread displacement in South Africa, these forms allowed the Sotho to maintain their identity through a visual means.

Although the chief weapon of the Sotho is the short assegai, long shafted assegai were found among the Sotho as well (Fig. 20, 21).¹²⁴ One can begin to grasp the complexity of Basotho visual vocabulary when examining the shields held by the Sotho soldiers. As Casalis suggests, and authors such as Tylden later confirm, the shape and color of shields often served as a visual definition of one's culture, community and corps (Fig. 22, 23).¹²⁵ The Sotho displayed a square shield surmounted by an inverted half moon shape, as is reflected in the examples owned by the National Museum (Fig. 24).¹²⁶ The men in the community were responsible for cutting and treating these animal hide

¹²³ Ibid.

objects, which were often accompanied by a plume of ostrich feathers.¹²⁷ The skin itself was not cured and was therefore very stiff, thus delivering adequate protection to its user.

Casalis, Ellenberger and Widdicombe all recorded how Sotho artists expressed virtuosity in creating utilitarian objects such as baskets and pottery. Among the Sotho, objects of this type are gendered. In general, female artists create objects of clay, such as the pots owned by both the British Museum and the National Museum, which often play a specific role in religious practices (Fig. 25).¹²⁸ When creating clay vessels, women will mold the clay forms by hand and bake them on a slow fire of *disu*, an open air fire of cow dung.¹²⁹ The method of manufacture has been described as “building with rings.”¹³⁰ In this technique, the body of the vessel is formed by building up rolls of clay rings on top of each other.¹³¹ After the rings are formed, they are smoothed together on the outside from base to rim.¹³² The base of the vessel may be made first and built on to, or closed

¹²⁴ Backhouse, 378.

¹²⁵ Casalis, 136; and Tylden, 33.

¹²⁶ Casalis, 135.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹²⁸ Ashton, 160; D. Frederic Ellenberger, 294; Lagden, *Basutos*, 13; and Widdicombe, 50.

¹²⁹ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 294; Widdicombe, 50.

¹³⁰ A. C. Lawton, *Bantu Pottery of Southern Africa* (Wynberg: The Rustica Press Pty., Ltd., 1967) p. 10. This technique is particular to the Kwena lineage of the South Sotho in Lesotho (formerly Basutoland). Other South Sotho family lines are noted to employ different techniques, such as spiraling and building with lumps. See Part VI of Lawton’s text for further discussion.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 106.

after the building of the body.¹³³ The vessels are given any surface decoration as soon as the pot is built.¹³⁴ Artists today use a grass stem, a nail or a knife to create the incised designs.¹³⁵ However, for burnishing, which is carried out after the vessel was dry, artists may use tools such as a piece of glass, a stone or the hoof of an ox.¹³⁶ Aside from drinking vessels, another common object found among these female artists is the thetana, an earthen vessel created for domestic use.¹³⁷ These objects are widely used within the home and are created for use by the women themselves, as well as their daughters.¹³⁸ Although ideas of feminine spaces may bring certain connotations to the minds of Western thinkers, it is important that one understands the significance of domestic spaces for the Sotho. In general, exterior spaces, such as the aforementioned khotla, are viewed as masculine, while the interior spaces are feminine. While it remains true that the female area of the home is the seat of domestic duties, such as child rearing and food preparation, women are also responsible in maintaining relations with the ancestors, the altars of whom are fixed within the female spaces of the home.¹³⁹ The long established religion of the Sotho involves the worship of the balimo, the ancestral spirits. Basotho believe that the deceased can afflict their living descendants for violating laws and

¹³³ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 103.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ D. Frederic Ellenberger, 294.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ van Wyk, 10; 14; 108.

customs of society, and can choose certain individuals to be their channels for communicating more directly with the community by dreams and visions. It is believed that one can bring misfortune and illness upon the community if he or she disobeys the balimo. The brewing of beer in Sotho pottery vessels plays a central role in maintaining positive relationships with these spirits, as it serves to honor and remember them.¹⁴⁰ As the spirits of the past have an effect on ideas linked with the feminine, such as both human and agricultural fertility, it should come as no surprise that the Sotho women are responsible for maintaining these important relationships for the family and community. Thus, women have always been responsible for the production of beer pots and strainers, examples of which can be seen in the collection of the Albany Museum. This artistic engendering is carried out in contemporary times as well, as it is believed that one's ancestors may have hard time recognizing commercially made containers.¹⁴¹

Sotho women were also said to create organic sculptures known as khongoana, which were essentially comprised of plant material that was crushed and molded into the shape of a figure. These dolls were carried on the back of women in hopes of inducing pregnancy, similar to the akua-ma that are found among the Akan of western Africa.¹⁴² Often termed "fertility dolls," these figures have developed into a distinct cylindrical or

¹⁴⁰ Klopper, Sandra, text to *African Renaissance*, by Peter Magubane (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, Ltd., 2000), 132.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Arbousset, 81.

triangular form, as can be seen in examples from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and the Conru collection of southern African art (Fig. 26).

When one examines the textile arts among the Sotho, one sees an interesting division. Although both genders participated in the plaiting of grasses, the objects created in the past by women differed in scale from those of men. Sotho men participated in creating large granary baskets, as well as objects intended for storage. These baskets were often very large, and took on a spherical shape with an elongated neck.¹⁴³ After being filled with grain or corn, these baskets were often capped with flat stones and cemented with a dung seal.¹⁴⁴ Sessiou, as these containers are called, were created with such skill that the tightness of the weave, mixed with the pressure of the grain within, was impervious to rain (Fig. 27).¹⁴⁵ This form of plaiting was created by use of a double-eyed needle which resulted in a strong, tight weave that resisted unraveling over multiple uses.¹⁴⁶

Basotho women, on the other hand, again found their work focusing on the realm of the home. Basin shaped baskets are known as seruto, which women used to carry corn and other harvested items back to the home.¹⁴⁷ This should come as no surprise, as Sotho women were the primary providers for the family and were responsible for the growth

¹⁴³ Backhouse, 369.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Casalis, 137.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Widdicombe, 48.

and maintenance of agriculture.¹⁴⁸ In addition, smaller versions of the distinct bell shaped sessiou were created by women and were used to hold hot liquids (Fig. 28).¹⁴⁹

Finely woven objects were not the only plaited objects found among the art of the Sotho. Textile arts appear in the earliest accounts, through the age of colonialism, and into contemporary times. Basotho men are recorded as specializing in thatched roofs in the 19th and 20th centuries, and also served as the community tailors, shoemakers and dressmakers.¹⁵⁰ Aside from the aforementioned beehive shaped hats, thatched triangular aprons of straw and grass were often worn by men.¹⁵¹ In addition to the thatched textiles that were created by the often seated, cross-legged tailors, colored blankets and rugs of wool were later worn in the cold winters of the region.¹⁵² With the influx of Western traders and the rise of a market economy, the leather kaross became outdated, and the use of these imported blankets began to reshape the appearance of the Sotho in their daily lives.¹⁵³ However, the significance of the indigenous textiles was unsurpassed until the 20th century as the wearing of the tseha, a type of leather trouser, remained the main way to distinguish a Mosotho from an Nguni man.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ van Wyk, 58.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵⁰ Casalis, 101; D. Frederic Ellenberger, 293.

¹⁵¹ Casalis, 136.

¹⁵² Arbousset, 13; and Widdicombe, 55.

¹⁵³ Widdicombe, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Arbousset, 213.

In addition to the hand crafted woven clothing created among the Sotho, many men were known as fine makers of animal skin clothing.¹⁵⁵ As is reflected in the examples owned by the Field Museum and the National Museum, both animal hide and sinews were utilized in the group effort of leatherwork.¹⁵⁶ Casalis described the activity of leatherwork as resembling ritual, as men would often gather in a circle, calling out various sounds to a rhythm, all the while passing the skin around, rubbing and twisting it.¹⁵⁷ The energy of the scene is said to increase as the rhythm picks up and the sounds rise. Some men are described as imitating the graceful movements of the gazelle, while others would spring upon the skin with the fury of lion.¹⁵⁸ When the noise finally ceases, the texture of the skin is soft as a glove. At times, the skin was said to be further embellished by men performing cuts on it with a knife.¹⁵⁹ The freehand work is said to produce lines, parallelograms, and circles with precision, maintaining the common motifs of geometric forms found within Sotho art. When the preparation of the skin was complete, the artists would grab their awls and pierce imperceptible holes, through which thread was passed (Fig. 29).¹⁶⁰ The final stitching was time consuming, yet viewed as an

¹⁵⁵ Widdicombe, 50.

¹⁵⁶ Casalis, 134; and D. Frederic Ellenberger, 294.

¹⁵⁷ Casalis, 134.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Casalis, 135.

honorable activity to the extent that even chiefs and administrators were not above assisting.¹⁶¹

Personal adornment in the Sotho culture also presented early viewers with a wide variety of forms and patterns. Although glass beads were being obtained from European settlers, often in exchange for labor or export goods such as grain, ivory and animal skins, Sotho-produced ornaments of copper were often worn by men and women.¹⁶² These bangles resembling interwoven, spiral springs were described as being drawn beyond human strength, a tribute to the skillfulness of the Sotho technique where metal rods are pulled through a mold of smaller diameter or specific shape in order to obtain the desired proportion.¹⁶³ The various accounts documenting this fact attest to the complexity of the metal working technology among the Sotho at the time of Western contact. In addition to the pulled copper forms, a wealth of brass neck and arm rings (mapetu) has also been found throughout the region, such as the examples found on display at the National Museum (Fig. 8).¹⁶⁴ Although there is no confirmation of mining being practiced by the early Sotho communities, there is evidence that metals were imported from across the Drakensberg Mountains from the Zizi of the Tugela River basin.¹⁶⁵ This, along with other

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Maylam, 44; Casalis, 66; and Widdicombe, 56.

¹⁶³ Backhouse, 363; and Widdicombe, 56.

¹⁶⁴ Arbousset, 113.

¹⁶⁵ Maylam, 44, 49. The Zizi are an Nguni lineage who originally settled in the area of modern-day Lesotho before the arrival of the Sotho. They later moved across the Drakensberg mountains towards modern-day Kwazulu Natal.

localized trade networks, points to the extensive internal and external trade system employed by the Sotho.¹⁶⁶

In addition to working with wire, the Sotho have a rich history of intricately carved and forged works for both utilitarian and aesthetic purposes. The blacksmith made objects of necessity, yet imbued them with the creativity and aesthetic twist that is evident in many Sotho collections, such as those owned by the British Museum and the National Museum. Within the culture, the blacksmith was known as Ugaka ea tsepe, the doctor of iron.¹⁶⁷ It was reported that these individuals underwent a long apprenticeship involving mysterious purifications in order to be successful.¹⁶⁸ The Sotho smiths used an anvil of basalt or granite, and a number of conical stone hammers that were wielded with one or both hands.¹⁶⁹ These tools of the trade were accompanied by a bellows system of double bags ending in a horn tube (Fig. 30, 31).¹⁷⁰ The smiths created a wealth of objects, which included spearheads, hoes, adzes, knives and needles, all of which were forged with careful attention.¹⁷¹ In addition to the purely forged objects, the smiths also created neatly joined objects combining both metal and wood, like the aforementioned axe from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.¹⁷² After the metals were shaped to the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Casalis, 131.

¹⁶⁸ Ashton, 158; and Casalis, 131.

¹⁶⁹ Casalis, 131-2.

¹⁷⁰ Casalis, 131.

¹⁷¹ Ashton, 158.

¹⁷² Casalis, 132.

artist's likening, objects were often soldered or ornamented with intricate chasing.¹⁷³ Although iron was the principle material used for weapons and implements, much of the existing work includes decorative additions of copper. Furthermore, copper, along with brass, was used to create objects in their entirety, such as finely manufactured collars and breastplates.¹⁷⁴

Because the country of Lesotho and the surrounding regions of South Africa are rich in ore, these metals were locally mined.¹⁷⁵ As is common throughout the region, the industry of smelting and forging metals was reserved for the men in the community.¹⁷⁶

Casalis also writes of wooden objects.¹⁷⁷ Some examples that have been recorded include oblong cylindrical vessels for milk, of which their interior is hollowed out with a javelin and their borders are decorated with a red-hot iron (black spiral or diamond shapes in regular, repetitive manner) (Fig. 32).¹⁷⁸ Casalis also describes examples of finely crafted wooden plates, an example of which can be seen at the National Museum (Fig. 33).¹⁷⁹ These artists also made spoons with exquisite and fantastic handles, similar to the examples owned by the British Museum and the National Museum, as well as

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Backhouse, 378.

¹⁷⁵ Casalis, 133.

¹⁷⁶ Lagden, *The Basutos*, 13.

¹⁷⁷ Casalis, 139.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

skillfully worked handles for knives and axes (Fig. 34, 35).¹⁸⁰ Amulets worn on necklaces were also created from wood, and often included symbols of strength such as the head of a buffalo.¹⁸¹ These objects were often accompanied by carved snuffboxes worn around the neck or arm, which played a significant role in Sotho culture (Fig. 36). Snuff served a number of purposes within the culture, including offerings of sacrifice to ancestral spirits, and as a tool used by diviners to achieve spirit possession. However, it is the activity of sharing snuff that embodies the greatest cultural significance. Politically, the role of the King was one of an overseer and provider for the people. Even today the ruler owns all of the land and cattle yet distributes them to his subjects as a sign of his power and generosity. In turn this act of generosity becomes a vital force in sustaining relationships between men at social events, as snuff would be shared from these personal art objects. Often these containers were created from cattle horn, as is reflected in the examples from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and the Albany Museum. Furthermore, exhibition catalogues, such as those offering perspectives on the Brenthurst collection (*Art and Ambiguity*), and the Conru collection (*The Art of Southeast Africa*), feature a number of snuff containers created by Sotho artists, each of which use a unique visual vocabulary to signify the ideas behind the work. Due to the importance of cattle within the Sotho culture, bovine imagery was widely used to signify leadership, power and wealth. In addition to these ideas, cattle were often linked to the ancestral spirits, as

¹⁸⁰ Casalis, 140.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

family herds are handed down from generation to generation.¹⁸² When one understands this spiritual significance, it comes as no surprise that the snuff contained in these boxes took on a supernatural undertone. This was also due tobacco's ability (as a stimulant) to create altered states of being.

Casalis explained that the snuffboxes, which serve as a symbol of status among both men and women, were also created in a variety of materials aside from the horn of a cow, including bone with a leather lid, antelope horn or a small calabash decorated with spots or squares arranged in regularity like draught board.¹⁸³ He also recorded rarer examples of ivory, and others that used skin shavings reduced to paste that were molded and formed.¹⁸⁴ These snuffboxes were usually accompanied by a "flattened spoon" which served as a pocket handkerchief, which can be seen in the example from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (Fig. 37).¹⁸⁵ Again, it should be stressed that all of these objects are created by Sotho men, as gender plays a significant role in community roles and industry.

After Gary van Wyk's 1998 publication *African Painted Houses*, Sotho architectural forms have been known for their beauty and complexity. Sotho homes are adorned with beautiful murals, all of which are viewed as women's work due to their link with the home, and which have religious connotations. Early writers such as Casalis and

¹⁸² Casalis, 153; 191.

¹⁸³ Casalis, 140.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Backhouse, 378.

Widdicombe recorded a variety of mural styles which were common among the Sotho in the mid-nineteenth century. Early Sotho house forms, thought to have been adapted from Fokeng groups to the West and North, consisted of circular walls of sod and clay, which were roughly five to six feet tall (Fig. 38).¹⁸⁶ These circular structures, known in Afrikaans as rondavels, are covered with a conical thatched roof that is set at a sharp pitch in order to resist any permeation from rainfall. Another type that was more common among the southern Sotho, the mahlomgoa-fatse, was an igloo-shaped dwelling with a long, tunnel-like entrance passage (Fig. 39).¹⁸⁷ This form, although rarely seen today, was better suited to the mountainous country, as it effectively kept out the cold temperatures and precipitation.¹⁸⁸ Casalis also makes mention of the fact that these structures were maintained by women, again emphasizing the importance of the role of women and the home within the Sotho community.¹⁸⁹

Although Casalis gives but a fleeting reference to buildings, he mentions “the walls [of dwellings] are perfectly well plastered, and often decorated with ingenious designs.”¹⁹⁰ In fact, according to van Wyk, Sotho archaeological sites reveal that mural painting dates back at least five centuries.¹⁹¹ Further evidence of the development of this artistic expression is confirmed by historian George Stow, who in 1887 recorded some of

¹⁸⁶ Casalis, 125; and Widdicombe, 52; van Wyk, 102.

¹⁸⁷ Casalis, 127; van Wyk, 102-103.

¹⁸⁸ Casalis, 127.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ van Wyk, 88.

the mural designs at Rama-roke's kraal in British Basotholand, which are among the earliest known drawings of Sotho mural arts (Fig. 40).¹⁹² Widdicombe made note of the significance of the home as being a feminine space, as all of the cooking and domestic work was done within the home and the reed screen that surrounded the courtyard (Fig. 41, 42).¹⁹³ The doors, which were often only two feet high, usually faced East or Northeast, in order to catch the first rays of the sun.¹⁹⁴

Sotho artists also created figurative sculpture in wood and clay. Although numerous collections, including those found at the Albany and National Museums, as well as those featured in the Conru collection, feature Sotho sculpture, there is an absence of references to sculpture in the historical sources. Later scholarship has attributed numerous sculptural forms to the South Sotho, such as Figures 43 and 44.¹⁹⁵ Although it is not clear why early writers did not refer to these freestanding works of art, the extant examples employ the Sotho visual vocabulary, as is explained in section IV.

¹⁹² van Wyk, 89. See George Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa* (Cape Town: C. Struik), 1964. The work of George Stow was posthumously edited by George Theal and originally published in 1905 as *The Native Races of South Africa*. A kraal is a cattle enclosure, or compound.

¹⁹³ Widdicombe, 52.

¹⁹⁴ Widdicombe, 54.

¹⁹⁵ Figure 61, a carved staff, is found in Tom Phillips, ed., *Africa: The Art of a Continent: 100 Works of Power and Beauty* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996), 91; Figure 62, which is described as a Sotho/Ntwane/Pedi didactic tool linked with initiation, comes from Sandra Klopper and Karel Nel, *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002), 117.

Although the aforementioned art forms still flourish among the Sotho in contemporary times, one must highlight the transformations brought to the arts and architecture over the past century. Beginning with architecture, which is the best known of Sotho arts thanks to Gary van Wyk, one can see a clear shift in both form and aesthetics. Upon settling among the Sotho, Casalis insisted that his converts progress towards “civilization” by settling in rectangular cottages built in stone with whitewashed faces.¹⁹⁶ At the very least, a preference was made towards the rondavel forms as opposed to the mahlomgoa-fatse common among the southern Sotho.¹⁹⁷ Ironically, the missionaries soon discovered that the mahlomgoa-fatse was an appropriate and economical design, as the plastered dome provided far better insulation than the thatch roofs of their rectangular cottages.¹⁹⁸ Although the rondavel was gradually adopted by the Sotho, they added one innovation: a porch extending from the doorway, recalling the entrance of the mahlomgoa-fatse.¹⁹⁹ The other house design later introduced among the Sotho is the parapet form (Fig. 45). This design, which was used at the Cape by the British and their Malay slaves, eventually spread eastward with the influence of the Cape colony.²⁰⁰ The first Boer settlers in the Free State thus produced permanent mud-brick or

¹⁹⁶ van Wyk, 109.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 111.

stone dwellings of the rectangular parapet style, which are now similar to those inhabited by modern Basotho farm workers within the same region.²⁰¹

From an aesthetic standpoint, the decoration of the home is the traditional sign of a proper Basotho home, and the essential duty of women. Furthermore, it is a form of religious art, as it serves as a way to honor and please the ancestors to whom Basotho pray for rain and provision.²⁰² The exterior, and often interior, spaces are covered with intricate geometric patterns designed and implemented by the woman of the house (Fig. 46). These designs, known as litema, or art of the earth, are created using four general techniques: engraving, painting, relief work and mosaic.²⁰³ These designs, which are filled with symbolism related to ideas of fertility and abundance, further emphasize the female role of provider within the culture by reflecting ideas linked with farming. Thus, the term litema, which comes from the idiom ho lema – to cultivate, literally embodies the elements of cultivation, namely the earth and the elements.²⁰⁴ In addition to the semantics linked to this artistic expression, the engraved designs themselves often evoke the idea of cultivating, as the forms may represent a birds-eye view of geometrically tilled fields, as well as plant and organic forms (Fig. 47). Because agricultural labor is also seen as women's work, it is thought that farming activities are transferred in form to the walls and floors of the female domain. Although many litema patterns resemble

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 10.

²⁰³ Ibid., 78.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.

organic forms, a further link to ideas of fertility can be seen when viewing the overall structure of the home. The house itself is often seen as a metaphor of the womb, a place of creation from which humans emerge.²⁰⁵ Thus, when combining the various meanings that are entwined within this form of art, a clear reference to the role, and realm, of women is seen.

Van Wyk writes that the murals call to and please the ancestors, disposing them to listen to the prayers of the family.²⁰⁶ The work itself may be described as a performance piece, as the litema forms have a life cycle of their own. The designs are produced annually and left to weather away by the elements throughout the passing seasons. The fact that the pigments and materials return to the earth is quite significant, as the earth is known to be the sacred dwelling of the ancestors. Thus, the materials themselves are charged substances, as the earth is also the prime building material. In addition to this, the colors used in the murals also bring new meaning to the designs. The historical palette of red, black and white creates a story in itself, with each color adding new significance to the overall religious theme. Red symbolizes the blood of animals offered to the ancestors in sacrifice.²⁰⁷ It also serves as a link to fertility by representing the menstrual flow of healthy, fertile women.²⁰⁸ Thus, the color evokes ideas of both rain, which comes from the ancestors, as well as fertility, both in the realm of humans as well as agriculture.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 110.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 14.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Black is a color directly linked with the ancestors. Not only is it the color linked with these spirits, but it also represents the dark rain clouds that their good will ushers in.²⁰⁹ White is the color of purity, transitional states and enlightenment, thus giving rise to the interaction between the living and the dead.²¹⁰ In all, the art of litema may be regarded as symbolic religious works, feminist visual statements and complex performance pieces.

Although early writers make no mention of it, possibly because of the secrecy surrounding the process, modern scholars have highlighted the presence of a masking tradition among the Sotho. The reed veils, linked with female initiation rites, place Sotho women in an exclusive group, as the men in the culture do not use masks during their initiation process. During the course of their instruction, young Basotho women are taught the core values of their society, as well as knowledge relating to their gender roles.²¹¹ Women are instructed on their roles as mothers, wives and guardians of the house.²¹² This transformation is outwardly echoed in the transformation of the body, as the female initiates cover themselves with white clay which symbolizes their liminal state and the purity that is required to effect their transition.²¹³ Furthermore, litema designs are often inscribed into the clay on the women's legs, alluding to the importance of female reproduction. The veils are also associated with feminine ideas and visually echo Basotho

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 116.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid., 119.

architecture. The reed masks shield the face of the young women just as the screen shielded the courtyard of historical Sotho homes (Fig. 48). The mask is called lesira, meaning windbreak, and can be seen as a parallel of the home, and a reminder of the aforementioned symbolism behind the house itself.²¹⁴ Lesira are also said to relate to a form of protection, as another meaning for the word refers to a medicine that prevents the enemy from seeing.²¹⁵ The mask also points towards creation accounts, as the first Sotho are said to have emerged from a bed of reeds.²¹⁶ This lends further credence to the idea of transformation, or rebirth as the participants emerge from behind the veils as Sotho women.

A final form which has seen an interesting change throughout the late 19th and early 20th century is the Sotho blanket. Originally exotic imports, wool blankets soon became a recognizable part of Basotho visual repertoire as the wearing of the kaross gradually became phased out during the last three decades of the 19th century. Through a visual transformation, the older leather kaross essentially became the imported woolen blanket in both use and significance. This is largely due to the trade market that developed during the Diamond Rush of the 1870's, and which further extended due to white expansion throughout the country, as well as to numerous livestock epidemics and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

²¹⁶ Casalis, 241.

wildlife scarcity in the reduced Sotho territory.²¹⁷ Although these commercially produced textiles may raise questions of relevance in regards to Sotho art, blankets now function as a cultural unifier. In her article on Basotho blankets, Myrtle Karstel explains that the Sotho nation is not only figuratively expressed as being “covered in the same blanket,” but the wearing of blankets has become a national identifier, announcing “I am a Mosotho (Fig. 49, 50).”²¹⁸ The background of these textiles stems from Bayer blankets, made in Germany, which consisted of columns of color.²¹⁹ The Frasers Trading Company of Basotholand also sent designs of Basotho murals, as well as a leopard kaross to an English blanket mill in 1885, thus developing a product for the Sotho market.²²⁰ As the trend caught on, different weights, colors and patterns were worn on different occasions and by people of different status.²²¹ Although the blankets worn by the Sotho have become associated with women’s sexuality and male graduation ceremonies, the image of body and blanket is a constant reminder that man is born through the “blanket” of women, which emphasizes the importance of marriage and family building within Sotho society.²²²

²¹⁷ van Wyk, 141.

²¹⁸ From the abstract included in Myrtle Karstel’s “The Basotho Blanket, Borrowed but Traditional.” *Navorsing Van Die Nasionale Museum Bloemfontein*. 11(8) October 1995: 193-223; and van Wyk, 141.

²¹⁹ van Wyk, 141.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 141-142.

²²² Ibid., 142.



Figure 16 - *A Mosuto Warrior*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 63.

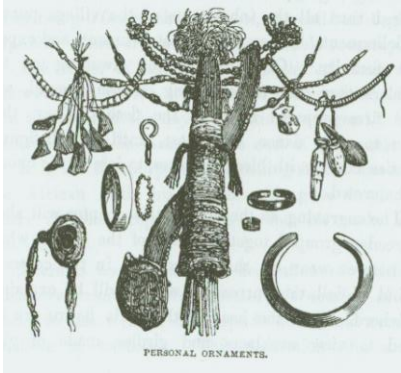


Figure 17 - *Personal Ornaments*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 152.



Figure 18 - *Playing the Tumo*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 149.



Figure 19 - Axe, 64-5-4. Image from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art electronic database, 2003.



Figure 20 - *Lance or assegai, and Hatchet*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 132.

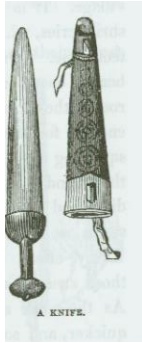


Figure 21 - *A Knife*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 133.

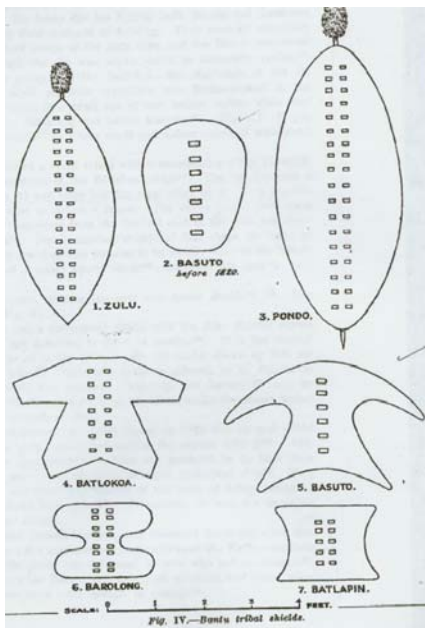


Figure 22 - *Bantu Tribal Shields*, from Tylden, G, Major. "Bantu Shields." *South African Archaeological Bulletin*. 1(2) March 1946: 33-40. P. 34.



Figure 23 - *Leathern Shield*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 136.



Figure 24 - *Sotho Shields*, 0.388; 0.1730. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 25 - *Earthenware Vessels*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Moriya: Moriya Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 146.



Figure 26 - *Doll*, from Klopper, Sandra and Karel Nel. *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002. P. 121.



Figure 27 - *The Sessiou*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 137.



Figure 28 - *Baskets*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 138.

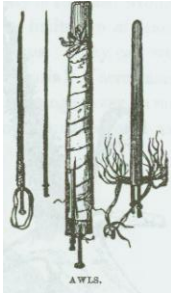


Figure 29 - *Awls*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 135.

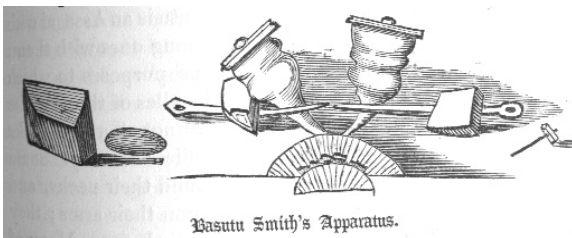


Figure 30 - *Basutu Smith's Apparatus*, from Backhouse, James. *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa*. London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1844. P. 377.



Figure 31 - *Boy Blowing the Bellows*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 131.



Figure 32 - *Wooden Vessels*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 139.



Figure 33 - *Wooden Plate*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 34 - *Spoon*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 140.



Figure 35 - *Wooden Spoon with Carved Handle*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 36 - *Snuff-Boxes and Pipe*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 141.



Figure 37 - *Snuff Container with Spoon*, 89-14-1. Image from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art electronic database, 2003.



Figure 38 - *Transversal Section of a Barolong Hut*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Moriija: Moriija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 126.



Figure 39 - *Hut of the Basutos*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Moriija: Moriija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 127.

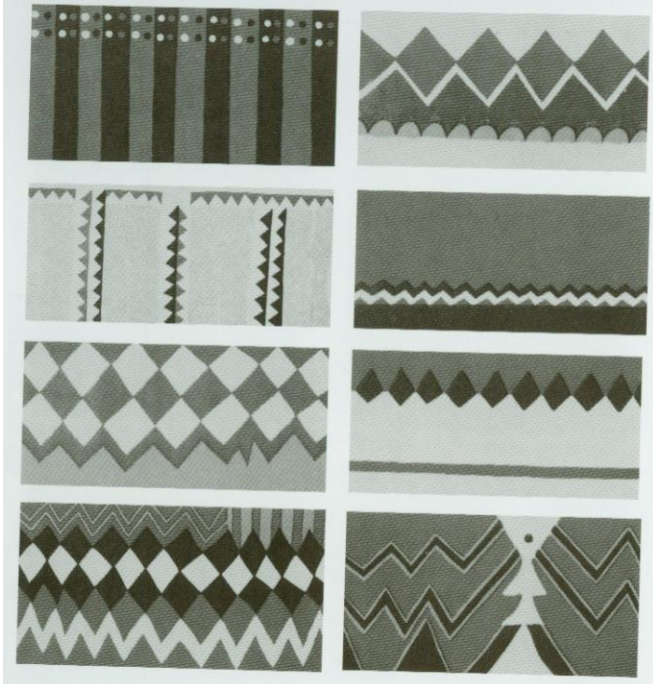


Figure 40 - *Exterior Designs Recorded by Stowe, 1877*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 89.

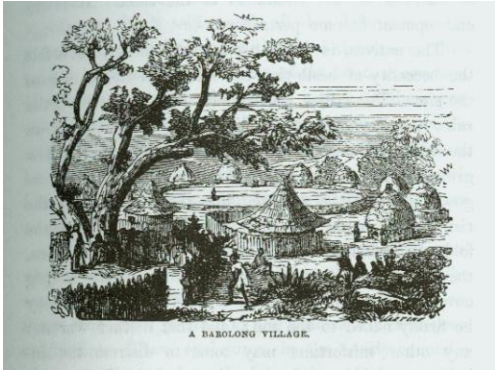


Figure 41 - *A Barolong Village*, from Casalis, Eugene. *The Basutos*. Introduction by Stephen J. Gill. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997 (1861). P. 123.



Figure 42 - *Reed Fence, or seotloana*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 107.



Figure 43 - *Colonial Staff*, from Phillips, Tom, ed. *Africa: The Art of a Continent: 100 Works of Power and Beauty*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. P. 91.



Figure 44 - *Figure*, from Klopper, Sandra and Karel Nel. *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002. P. 117.



Figure 45 - *Parapet-style House*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 111.



Figure 46 - *Alina Tsotesi's Home*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 42.



Figure 47 - *Nyaduwe Motlounng at Work Incising*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 79.



Figure 48 - *Sotho Women Wearing Seotloana*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 118.



Figure 49 - *The Moloji family, friends of the author.* Personal photo of the author, 2001.



Figure 50 - *The Moloji Family, friends of the author.* Personal photo of the author, 2001.

Chapter IV. Analysis of Aesthetics

Although the Sotho collection at the National Museum in Bloemfontein displays a wide range of forms and medium, there seems to be a common thread that links many of the objects together. Whether viewing textiles, ceramics, beadwork or painted materials, one quickly recognizes the presence of order through symmetry and unified patterns. These ideas of repetition, unity and variety cross over from each specific artistic category, and make themselves manifest in unique ways with each specific object type.

That the Sotho are expert weavers is of no question. Even the earliest scholars attest to the variety and ingenuity of the culture's woven objects. This expertise can be seen in the repetition of line and pattern in Basotho plaited grass hats. I was able to access a large number of Basotho hats, which were commonly worn by Basotho men, and are still worn today. Generally speaking, these objects share a common form: a wide, conical shape, closely resembling the thatch roofs found on rondavel-style dwellings, and often terminating in a ball or ring. The hats themselves are composed of both broad and thin grasses, allowing the artist to create a tight warp and weft. However, upon further analysis, one quickly notices the small nuances found in the patterning of the weave. For example, Figure 51 clearly shows the uniformity in design found in the two concentric patterned bands. The artist has created an object that reflects a skill in weaving, as can be seen in the uniformity of overall shape, as well as the radiating vertical warp lines. A closer look reveals alternating widths within the weave, which are especially clear near the apex of the piece. However, the eye is immediately drawn to the more obvious pattern formed by the colored bands. Throughout the piece, the artist holds to a very specific

design, which begins and ends without any flaw or overlap. The ability to calculate the width of each module of the pattern, as well as its position on the overall object points to a skill of precision and mathematical absolutes. In addition, the artist has chosen to create two different patterns within each respective band. However, uniformity in aesthetics is upheld as the pattern angle of the outermost band reflects and complements the radiating forms found within the innermost band. Although one may suggest that the artist is “locked in” to a particular pattern based on the weave, Sotho artists employ many techniques by which to create adaptations to the weave, thus creating visible designs. Whether by forming visible concentric circles by a shift in the weave, or by adding in colored grasses, the Sotho artists are able to introduce variations in the surface design while remaining true to the overall form. This expertise allows the individual artist to create specific designs and patterns within an otherwise closed system, highlighting the uniqueness of each object formed. Throughout time, new ideas have emerged around this single form, bringing new colors, patterns and dimensions to an otherwise fixed art form (Fig. 52, 53).

The idea of uniformity and order can also be found in the ceramic arts. To begin, the majority of the ceramic objects held by the National Museum follow a particular form. Generally, the sculpted forms have a wide, circular mouth, with a body that flairs out beyond the original opening, and gently tapers back down to a narrow base (Fig. 54, 55). That this form appears over and over again is of no surprise, given the seriality of form with the aforementioned plaited hats. However, again, the artists are able to impress

their own creativity through the designs that are added to the exteriors of these vessels. As in the plaited forms, there is an emphasis on linear pattern and design. This idea is augmented by the repetition of a particular design, whether applied with pigment, or incised into the vessel itself. By looking at Figures 56, 57 and 58, it is easy to pick up on the uniformity of the design as a whole. Each example includes a colored band containing a pattern of repeated forms around the most expansive part of the vessel. Although the width of the bands varies, overall one can pick out a distinct decorative style being employed among the three works. Upon further examination, we can see yet another aspect linked to the ideas of uniformity and repetition. In each of the three examples, one can see how the artist is not only focusing on linear, geometric forms, but adds a new sense of depth with the variation of color used. Figure 56 shows a simple pattern of interlocking triangles fashioned in such a way as to create a solid band. However, the artist expands on the use of pattern by including a variation of light and dark colors. Thus, the viewer is presented with an intermittent “push-pull” of color, lending credence to a further aesthetic dimension.

Figures 57 and 58 also reflect this idea to a further extent as the artists have chosen to expand on the color palette used within the design. Although these two examples were created in the mid- to late-20th century, which is made evident in the expanded use and availability of color, the artists have remained true to the characteristics of the former by creating a visual field that employs both geometry and color to complement the overriding theme of repetition and uniformity. Finally, Figure 59 shows

an expansion on the decorative techniques found among Sotho pottery. While the aforementioned vessels employed pigment to create the visual message, this example relies simply on incised marks within the clay itself to delineate a pattern upon the form. Again, one can recognize the presence of a repetitive form, this time consisting of broad arching lobes. Although there is a lack of linear geometry on the overall shape of the band, which appears much more organic, the artist includes strict angular incisions which form triangular motifs within the pattern. In addition to this, one may notice how the artist approaches the “push-pull” idea of opposing colors in a sculptural vocabulary by using two distinct hatching techniques. While the interior of the lobes is dotted with tiny rows of etched circles, the triangular forms assert themselves through larger diagonal hatching that offers a nice contrast to the overall design. Whether painted, incised or created by a number of techniques, these concentric patterns are married to the forms themselves, and reflect the same ingenuity as was found in the aforementioned plaited hats.

Pattern is also masterfully employed in the beadwork of the Sotho. If one were to examine any number of beaded forms from the collection, one would immediately be drawn to the precise patterns laid out by the artists. The presence of repeated patterning shows up on both sculptural forms, such as beaded figures, as well as more decorative objects that were worn on the body. Figures 9, 10, 26, 60 and 61 give us several different examples of this. In Figure 60, one is quickly reminded of the triangular pattern present in the band of Figure 56. A simple pattern is formed consisting of opposing triangles

arranged in such a manner as to form a solid rectilinear form. Again, the artist employs color as a way to create further opposition within the design, such as the black and white beads. A further sense of control is added by the pink beads, which create a structure to the interior of the pattern, while also containing the forms like a frame at the terminating ends. Again, we see the emphasis on linear geometry not only with the lines and triangular forms, but within the combination of the light and dark halves which create a squared off module as a whole.

As we draw our attention to other beaded belts, the overall emphasis remains the same. Figure 61, although solely focused within the band itself, reflects this uniform pattern of repetition. However, an interesting observation may be made by comparing this pattern to that found in Figure 9. One may notice that the pattern found upon Figure 61 is strictly linear – the design is laid out and repeated in groups of two that may be read from one end to the other. For example, on the far left we are presented with a long rectangle divided into two halves, which are yellow and red, respectively. Following this form is a smaller pattern consisting of a yellow rectangle that is buttressed on either end by red rectilinear forms. This set is then repeated on the belt, with the longer form followed by the smaller. Next, we are presented with a new set consisting of black and blue rectangles followed by the alternating red-yellow-red pattern. This set is then repeated, and we are presented with the original group once again. Thus, a strict linear pattern is formed by the artist.

However, in contrast to this, Figure 9 presents us with a mirrored pattern on the belt. No longer are we able to read the pattern from one end to the other, but rather the artist has chosen to join them in the center of the belt, forming a bi-laterally symmetrical reflection of itself. Although the artist reverts to a linear pattern on the fringe, she nonetheless determined to create two opposing patterns among the belt itself and the fringe. This again hints at the “push-pull” theme so commonly found among Sotho geometrical aesthetics. Just as opposing colors are often placed against one another to form a visual tension, so are these opposing patterns which divide the ornament into two distinct sections. Furthermore, the overall forms used within the piece return to linear geometry, employing such shapes as the parallelogram and triangle. Thus, we are faced with a two-fold pattern of repetition – complementary geometric forms, and intermittent color use. Further evidence of this can be found in Sotho objects found in other collections, such as those illustrated by Sandra Klopper and Karl Nel in *The Art of Southeast Africa*. Figures 10 and 26, which consist of beadwork panels and a “doll,” were taken from this text; both employ the ideas of repetition with geometric forms, as well as uniformity and order, as is reflected in the strict division of registers throughout. These registers follow a strict horizontal division, recalling the reliance on geometry and ordered form. Furthermore, the overall form of the beaded “doll” in Figure 26 reflects the triangular motif found upon its beaded surface, again emphasizing the idea of repetition and uniformity.

Although these two forms are quite different, one must not overlook the similarities found in both pattern and color. The colors of red, white and black, from the aforementioned Basotho historical color palette, seem to be used to a certain extent in both, but one may also note the added spectrum of modern colors, transporting tradition into the contemporary. In addition to the color scheme, the zigzag motif appears upon many of these objects. In Sotho belief, the most visible appearance of Modimo (God) is the form of lightning. Lightning bridges heaven and earth by visibly connecting them, thus completing a cycle of Modimo returning to Its source in the earth.²²³ In addition, Sotho mythology highlights the Lightning Bird, who is Modimo's special messenger, and the carrier of rain.²²⁴ Taken together, these beliefs suggest that zigzag motifs, which are central in the repetitive "push-pull" dialogue of the Sotho visual arts, may hold a deep significance.

The balance between positive and negative spaces is related to the concept of litema, the art of earth. Litema is expressed in the decoration of the exterior of some Basotho homes, and may appear in a number of forms. Most commonly, litema patterns have been painted on, or etched into the earthen walls of these Sotho dwellings. For this form of public art, the emphasis on pattern, repetition and the push/pull of light and dark coloring are obviously related to other art forms. An example can be seen in Figure 62, which is the home of Florina Tsotetsi in the Free State province of South Africa. The

²²³ Casalis, 242.

²²⁴ van Wyk, 100.

presence of a repeated module of pattern is easily recognized, as is the extensive use of geometry and mathematical exactitude.

A closer look at some of the more commonly found patterns reveals more about this mural art in regards to other Sotho patterning. As a general rule of thumb, litema patterns tend to lean towards more organic forms, as was also seen in the decorative bands of some Sotho pottery. This should come as no surprise, given that this art form has such a strong relation to the earth and it's characteristics of provision through growth and regeneration. However, the artists still manage to manipulate the patterns to include both clear organic forms and strong geometry. For example, Figure 63 shows us a pattern named Moraba-raba, a title which comes from a commonly played game of strategy. Although at first glance the pattern seems to be made up simply of strong diagonals and intersecting lines, the overall view relates to a repeated leafy form featuring a central stem with radiating veins. A clearer example of this may be found in Figure 64, which is referred to as Lesotho. Although much more organic in appearance with its sweeping curves and flowering appearance, the artist still follows a strict geometry by forming squared off modules of repetition, as well as triangular forms within the negative spaces found between the main circular forms. Again, we are presented with a fine mixture of both harsh geometry and flowing organic forms. The patterns range from the clearly simplistic to the extremely complex, as can be seen in Figure 65. This pattern, also a form of the Lesotho type, mixes an interplay of shapes with a far more complex use of color. Here we are once again presented with the "push-pull" of light and dark colors, as was

reflected in the aforementioned ceramic and beaded objects, which adds a further dimension of complexity to the overall pattern. Again, one can easily pick out the central module of pattern that is simply rotated and repeated throughout the entire mural.

Aside from the visual complexities found within both form and color, one must not overlook the different techniques employed within this public art form. We have seen examples of paint and pigments used to delineate patterns, but the art of litema is not limited to a two dimensional surface. Figure 66 shows a detail of a pattern, revealing not only the use of pigment, but of other techniques including relief work and etching. By employing different techniques, the artists are able to create a variety of surface types, each of which reveal a different and unique visual palette. In addition, it reveals the creativity and uniqueness of the artists and their methods, both of which are constantly evolving and being reworked to reveal further complexities in both aesthetics and symbolism. A clearly mathematical process, the art of litema is one of grand complexities mixed with the simplicities found in nature itself.

Although a clear common motif may be found among the aforementioned motifs of Sotho art, one may notice a dramatic change when examining the sculptural forms of horn, bone and wood. Among these plastic arts, the clear presence of pattern and repetition is not evident. In reality, it is rarely found at all, insofar as the forms we are now familiar with. However, Sotho artists remain true to the general ideas of uniformity, pattern and repetition, while uniting aesthetics with the form and properties of the materials. Some examples of this can be found among the sculptural works found in

Sandra Klopper and Karen Nel's text *The Art of Southeast Africa*. Although the text itself contains few Sotho examples in comparison to those of the other peoples represented, these few examples are quite exquisite in quality and form. Figure 67 is a fine example to begin with. A beautiful snuff container of horn and wood, it displays skill in both the delicacy and uniformity of design. The artist left no detail untouched. Even down to the rounded eyelet at its base, this container displays a swirled fluted body that tapers toward its cylindrical opening. Although the more blatant ideas of pattern are dismissed in favor of this fluid form, one can still see the repetition found within the swirls. Not only are the flutes equally spaced out among the body of the vessel, they are simply a swirled, linear pattern repeated around the surface. Thus, the artist achieves the same idea of uniformity, pattern and repetition, while creating a visually stimulating form that truly accentuates the overall tapered shape of the vessel itself. The artist had begun with a common form, the line, and simply manipulated it on a more organic level to create this delicate piece. Again, we can see the use of geometry and organic form, as was seen among the Litema paintings and decorative pottery bands.

This idea can be seen again in a rather unassuming example found in Figure 68. This is another example of a snuff container made of horn, which takes on a very different appearance from our former example. Again, at first glance it appears to be missing the characteristics found among the former examples, yet the artist has simply taken a different approach to incorporating them into the overall form. Recalling Figure 57 to our attention, this piece shared the same ideas of symmetry and "mirroring." Much

like the beaded belt which was divided into two identical halves, this container achieves the same effect with its human representation. The artist has even assisted us by including a clear line of division through the center of the figure. This line divides the figure through the bridge of its nose, through its sharply pointed chin, and on through the center of the torso. Even the appendages reflect each other on either side, such as the widespread, boot clad legs and the geometric arms that meet each other in the center of the form. The idea of order and uniformity is further emphasized by comparing the upper arms to the central axis of the form. The relief of the arms creates parallel lines with the center line, and the opposing limb, hinting at a repetitive pattern and uniform composition.

These new innovations in form and pattern are not limited to objects of horn, but are reflected in wooden objects as well. Figure 43 reflects this same idea of symmetry within the finial of a walking stick. The figure of a man in 19th century European dress is bilaterally symmetrical, and even includes a central division line between its legs. Each feature is matched on its opposing side, giving rise to this different expression of order and repetition. Finally, Figure 44 is a fine freestanding sculptural example that recalls the overall characteristics of the snuff container found in Figure 68. The blocky, wide stance and squared off shoulders express a common vocabulary, each which translate ideas of order and symmetry in a bi-lateral means. The freestanding figure combined strict geometry with organic curves to complete a fluid composition. Features such as the ears, nose and mouth recall the strong use of line and geometric form found in Litema patterns

and Sotho beadwork. The artist brilliantly creates a fluid composition by relying on repetition, as can be seen in the horizontal line found at the central hairline, closed eyelids, base of the nose, mouth, chin and shoulders. Even the wide crotch of the figure picks up on this strong use of line, thus uniting itself with the upper reaches of the figure through repetition. Yet the artist shows a unique ability to match such strong linear forms with a fluid organic aesthetic, as can be seen in the curved forearms and rounded musculature of the figure. Again, this comes as no surprise, as we have observed this blending within other mediums of Sotho art, such as the pottery bands and litema murals.



Figure 51 - A Plaited Grass Hat, 0.3467. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 52 - A Plaited Grass Hat, 0.3467. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 53 - *A Plaited Grass Hat*, 0.3467. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 54 - *Basotho Pottery*, 0.3325. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 55 - *Basotho Pottery*, 0.3325. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 56 - *Basotho Pottery*, 0.3325. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 57 - *Basotho Pottery*, 0.1088. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 58 - *Basotho Pottery*, 0.1089. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 59 - *Detail, Basotho Pottery*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



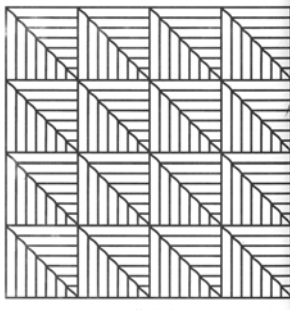
Figure 60 - *Beaded Panel*, 0.3135. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.



Figure 61 - *Beaded Panel*. Personal photo taken at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, 2003.

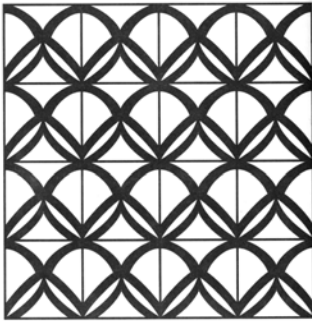


Figure 62 - *Florina Tsotetsi's Home*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 13.



tema Moraba-raba

Figure 63 - *Moraba-raba Pattern*, from Gerdes, Paulus. *Women, art and geometry in Southern Africa*. Trenton, NJ, Africa World press, 1998. P. 114.



Lesotho

Figure 64 - *Lesotho Pattern*, from Gerdes, Paulus. *Women, art and geometry in Southern Africa*. Trenton, NJ, Africa World press, 1998. P. 112.

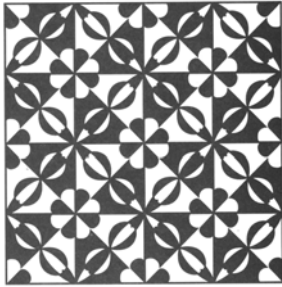


Figure 65 - *Lesotho Pattern*, from Gerdes, Paulus. *Women, art and geometry in Southern Africa*. Trenton, NJ, Africa World press, 1998. P. 158.



Figure 66 - *Litema Close-up*, from van Wyk, Gary N. *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998. P. 8.



Figure 67 - *Snuff Container*, from Klopper, Sandra and Karel Nel. *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002. P. 74.



Figure 68 - *Snuff Container*, from Klopper, Sandra and Karel Nel. *The Art of Southeast Africa from the Conru Collection*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions srl, 2002. P. 77.

Chapter V. Final Words

Through the analysis of these art objects, one can identify the complexities and nuances wrapped up in the art of the Sotho. The art forms express both structure and order, often leading to geometrically based aesthetics. Through formal analysis of Basotho art objects, and by re-establishing the social, political and cultural history of the Sotho, one can identify the value and importance of the arts of this marginalized culture. However, this study also sheds light on a larger issue at hand. Although the study of African art has established its place within the discipline of Art History through the work of countless pioneers within the field, we must not be satisfied. Just as the marginalized art history of Africa has been accepted into the realms of academia, now we must focus

on defining and defending the marginalized cultures within this fringe field of study. The Sotho have proven their legitimacy through both their recorded history and art objects. The visual evidence related to their arts reflect a perseverance and long standing development of style and order, and give insights into a culture that withstood centuries of opposition. Yet, Sotho arts are virtually unknown outside of southern Africa. By bringing attention to Sotho arts, we are, in essence, writing them back into history. Just as the aforementioned early scholars and writers were not equipped to look at Basotho art, we too must continue to learn, training ourselves to see beyond the scope of mainstream Africa within the discipline of Art History.

Through this study, it has been established that there are rich collections of Sotho art present in some of the foremost museums in the world. Now is the time to bring these pieces out of storage, and subject them to further historical and formal analysis. Although the extant literature concerning the history of Sotho art may be limited, it still offers a wealth of information regarding the development of forms, and the aesthetic and utilitarian value of the objects to both the artists and their communities. Furthermore, by bringing these objects to the forefront, we are not only confronting a charged and controversial history, but are expanding the common repertoire of what is “African” within the museum culture. The Sotho of Southern Africa are a perfect example of a culture rich in art that have been pushed aside by the interest and excitement garnered by other art forms. Although their textiles and utilitarian objects may not fit within the Western definitions and expectations of African art, their artwork is unique and points

towards their important role within the development of the art history of southern Africa. By reintroducing Basotho objects and history alike, I hope to provide a catalyst for change not only in the specialized field of African Art History, but in the Art Historical discipline as a whole.

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