Tanzanian government has repeatedly tried to discourage Maasai from retaining their conservative pastoral life and their striking dress, grooming, and weaponry, considering these signs of backwardness. Yet that same Tanzanian government implicitly encourages these images of a supposedly noble African tradition in pictures of Tanzania sometimes presented to Western tourists. Maasai might dance in traditional garb and cosmetics at jamborees in a national stadium (provided the men wear shorts under their togas) but would be discouraged from walking through downtown Dar es Salaam in such attire. Finally, the Asante royal government recently instituted a Palace Museum to display their royal regalia as a publicity move to enhance the dignity and image of the Asante kingship (a political entity with a long and troubled relationship not only toward the previous British colonial government but toward the African national governments which followed). Asante leaders brought the regalia to display for part of one day, but now the museum is empty and the regalia returned to its diverse, traditional custodians. In Asante, ideas about museums and creating modern public images clash with deep-rooted notions about cultural objects as still being sacred and vital goods to be guarded and secluded from ordinary view except on regal, ritual occasions (Schildkrout 1995).

A final issue about African art and fine art connects to the next section, the issue of promoting African art to promote African identity.

Both African identity or identities and African objects as art are new concepts that require promotion to the same level of respect and appreciation as other identities and objects such as those involving Europe, European peoples, and European art.

African artefacts have not long been considered art at all. They were originally collected in the West mainly as trophies of colonialism. Egyptian and northern African objects were, however, considered art for a much longer time than sub-Saharan art, at least ever since Napoléon's visit to Egypt. Respect for Egypt and related geographical areas often led scholars and museums to segregate objects from these places from objects out of the rest of Africa south of the Sahara. Sub-Saharan art was deemed, by contrast, to be primitive and uncivilized (with the possible exception of objects from Christian, literate Ethiopia). When Europeans discovered technologically complex metalwork in west Africa, they were surprised and purchased such goods for museums; but even impressive works like the Benin "bronzes" and ivories or the great west African renaissance ivory carvings made for European traders found their ways not into museums of fine art but into ethnographic museums or into cabinets of curiosities. Only in the first decades of the 20th century did a few avant-garde artists and art critics claim that "primitive" art, and especially traditional African art, was "fine" (Paudrat 1984: 137–143). The first exhibit in Europe of African objects to be described as "art" (shown along with objects from Oceania and Asia) was in Budapest in 1911; two years later a similar show was held in Paris (Paudrat 1984: 148, 152). In America, African art achieved formal recognition as art in 1914 at the Alfred Stieglitz Gallery in New York City but given its greatest boost by the Negro African Art show held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935. In 1957 in New York City the Museum of Primitive Art (now incorporated into the Metropolitan Museum) was founded and in that same year the first doctorate in art history was awarded to a scholar in African art (by University of Iowa to Roy Sieber). Recognition of African art as "fine" is reflected by changes in the techniques of exhibition. There is a vast difference between the cluttered ethnographic cases of the early natural history museums and overseas empire expositions (Coombes 1994; Vogel 1988) and the elegant, austere vitrines and beautifully lighted wall-hangings employed to display a few objects in the very first exhibits of African "fine" art (e.g., Vogel 1988: 13). While a catalogue cannot replace the impressions of an exhibition, the elegant photographs in Phillips' catalogue convey a sense of "fineness" and awe (even for some dismal objects) when compared to old-fashioned ethnographic catalogues of "material culture." The purpose of such display tactics in both exhibitions and catalogues is to promote African objects into being "fine" art and not mere ethnographic specimens. Comparable ploys are well understood by African dealers coping with European collectors and dealers (Steiner 1995). Western dealers in America and Europe are even more sophisticated. I know one dealer in large quantities of African crafts who had difficulty securing high prices for "fine" pieces which he kept on the same premises with mass-appeal goods likely to be bought by "decorators" and "craft people." He eventually established a separate gallery, with austere decor, sedately scattered vitrines with numbered labels, and a catalogue with a price guide. He promoted this with a wine party opening, thus entering a higher level of commerce. Fine items do not command high prices in crowded, ordinary shops.