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Making Absences Present: The Process of Visualizing Knowledge Production in Museum Records

Caitlin Glosser
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Abstract
In this paper, I evaluate the development of data visualizations as an art historical approach. By visualizing data for Senufo-labeled objects in the Musée Africain de Lyon’s collection, I demonstrate how the museum’s knowledge infrastructure privileges European collectors over African makers. I use Tableau visualizations to decenter this narrative by making silences present in a more impactful manner than through text alone. The visualizations also reveal the complex role that one maker, Bèma Coulibaly, played in the life of the collection. The addition of the individual narrative to the data was necessary to bring a human element into view.

Résumé
Nous examinons ici le développement des visualisations de données comme méthode pour l’histoire de l’art. En visualisant les données des objets catalogués Senufo dans la collection du Musée Africain de Lyon, nous démontrons comment le musée privilégie les collectionneurs européens par rapport aux fabricants africains, et comment les visualisations Tableau permettent de décentrer notre récit en rendant les silences bien plus présents que ne le ferait un texte seul. Les visualisations révèlent le rôle qu’un fabriquant, Bèma Coulibaly, a joué dans la vie de cette collection. L’ajout de ce récit individuel enrichit les données d’une dimension plus humaine.

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On the 11th of November 2014, the major art auction house Sotheby’s sold a Senufo-labeled work, a wooden sculpture of a female figure that stands nearly three-feet tall, for just over 12 million dollars. To date, this amount is the highest one ever paid for a wooden sculpture from the continent of Africa. Historically, the term Senufo has designated a style of art, a group of languages, and an ethnic or cultural group associated with the region joining Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali in West Africa. Senufo works are among the most well-studied historical art produced in Africa. In 1946, one of the first PhDs ever awarded in the field of African art history went to the Belgian scholar Albert Maesen, who wrote his dissertation on Senufo art. Senufo art was also the subject of a groundbreaking 1963 exhibition at the Museum of Primitive Art, which later transferred its collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This exhibition was only the second-ever show in a major art museum dedicated to a single style of African art. Previous exhibitions had focused on broader groupings of objects from the continent. Given its popularity for scholars, collectors, and museumgoers, one would assume that we know quite a lot about the works that we have come to call Senufo and their contexts of creation.

In Sotheby’s effort to sell the female figure, it published a description of the work’s history in a catalogue accompanying the auction, which Sotheby’s named after Myron Kunin the single seller whose collection was on offer. Written by Sotheby’s head of African and Oceanic art at the time, Heinrich Schweizer, the description opens by informing the reader that the figure was “created by a Senufo artist from Ivory Coast in the 19th or early 20th century.” The data presented is not promising. The creator’s name is unidentified. The geographical location of the work’s production encompasses an entire country with borders defined through colonial entanglement with France. Finally, the date of the work’s production spans more than a century. The imprecise information contrasts with the much more specific information pertaining to the names of European and American collectors who had once owned the object as well as European and American institutions that had exhibited the work. Four paragraphs later, Schweizer shifts attention to the object itself and recognizes the labor of the so far unidentified maker who, at this point in the description, he refers to using the moniker the “Master of Sikasso.”

Schweizer’s narrative prioritizes the history of the object’s acquisition and exhibition by European and American collectors above the history of its life in Côte d’Ivoire. Moreover, the narrative displaces the maker’s agency and the work’s cultural context, linking the work to Kunin and highlighting its universal value. Schweizer asserts that the sculpture stands as “One of the greatest achievements of man…” He further notes that “the Kunin statue transcends the corpus of African art and is best described as a masterpiece of world art.” For such a valuable object with an impressive history of


2. Schweizer, “Catalogue Note.”

3. It is common in the study of historical African arts to create a title or designation that can stand in for makers whose names are unknown, but whose work scholars have identified as creations of a single person or workshop. These monikers are one way to give credit or agency to an unidentified maker. For example, Susan Mullin Vogel uses the moniker “Totokro Master” to refer to a series of portrait masks produced by an individual linked to the village Totokro in Côte d’Ivoire. Examples of the use of the term “master” to identify an unknown maker found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection include “Master of Kasadi Workshop” and “Master of Ogol.” Susin Mullin “Known Artists but Anonymous Works: Fieldwork in Art History,” African Arts 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 45-55, 93-952-55.

4. Schweizer shifts attention to the object itself and recognizes the labor of the so far unidentified maker who, at this point in the description, he refers to using the moniker the “Master of Sikasso.”


ownership and exhibition, the gaps in the historical record are striking. Yet, these gaps are not uncommon for an object from Africa in a European or North American collection.9

The question then is, how can African art historians reimagine the narratives attached to works like this object despite the often-irredeemable gaps or silences in the historical record? This paper proposes that digital humanities methods offer a potential creative solution. By taking a critical look at one digital art history project’s process, I will demonstrate that unlike conventional research methods, the use of technology to aggregate, examine, and visualize data from museum records allowed me to make those silences visible. By visualizing those silences, I model a means of shifting the narrative embedded in the records away from that of European collectors and recentering the marginalized voices of unidentified African makers.

As I will show, digital methods offer a way to scale up the question, revealing the pervasiveness of the issue of silences in historical records. The nature of data visualization, meaning the translation of data into images, also allowed me to communicate my argument with ease to a broader audience, one totally unfamiliar with the question at hand. Finally, the process of visualizing data led me to an unexpected finding, one that may have been more difficult to recognize had I not employed a digital approach. Yet, these findings ultimately directed me back to close looking in an effort to more fully decenter the embedded narrative and highlight the influential voice of one specific maker. A serious consideration of this project’s trajectory will demonstrate how a careful balance of digital approaches with traditional art historical methods produced an effective means of communicating how knowledge is constructed in museum records and how researchers can responsibly interpret and enhance that knowledge.

The Project: Mapping the Musée Africain de Lyon?

In the summer of 2016, I joined the collaborative born-digital project Mapping Senufo as a graduate research assistant. At that point in time, the project’s goal was to create an interactive, digital map using the place-based information gathered by the co-directors, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis, from museums, archives, and other sources about Senufo-labeled objects.10

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, government officials and missionaries, and later art connoisseurs, curators, and art historians applied the term Senufo to objects associated with the region joining present-day Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali. One of the earliest people to apply the term Senufo to a map was the French colonial administrator Maurice Delafosse. Delafosse published a map in 1908, entitled “Sketch of the Country of Siéna or Senufo.”11 The map shows a dotted line drawn around the region where the borders of these three countries meet. As Gagliardi explains, Delafosse’s desire to concretely define a “Senufo country” stems from an early anthropological assumption that all of Africa is divided up into bounded regions and inside each region exists a single, fixed cultural group.12 Anthropologists and other writers assumed that each cultural group had its own specific language, religion, and by extension, artistic style. However, historians today recognize that the idea of a bounded Senufo identity and geographical region is a colonial fiction.13 Gagliardi reveals that even Delafosse himself recognized that not everyone he used the term Senufo to identify would have used the term to identify

9 According to Sotheby’s, the earliest known provenance for the work is its acquisition by the Swiss art dealer Emil Storrer in 1952. As listed, it is unclear where or from whom Storrer acquired the work. Schweizer, “Catalogue Note.”

10 The project’s name has been updated to Mapping Senufo: Art, Evidence, and the Production of Knowledge. You can find more information about the history and current state of the project on its website: https://www.mappingsenufo.org/about-the-project.


13 Gagliardi explains that pre-colonization, the term Senufo and its related variants had multiple different possible meanings. For example, it might have been used to signal differences in occupation, language, or religion in different contexts. Gagliardi, “Mapping Senufo,” 140. See also Gagliardi, Senufo Unbound.
For my part, I aimed to analyze and visualize data from a single museum, the now-closed Musée Africain de Lyon in France. I worked with a collection of 344 record cards that catalogued the Senufo-labeled objects held by the museum and contained place-based information. The history of the museum’s collection is closely tied to the efforts of the Société des Missions Africaines (SMA), a Catholic missionary society. A few years after the society was founded in Lyon in 1856, the director at that time, Augustin Planque, made the collection and display of objects from Africa an integral part of the mission’s practice. Writing to the Father Francesco Borghero and his two confrères in West Africa on 19–25 May 1861, Planque urges, “Don’t forget to send us, at the first opportunity, a collection of things from your new homeland. We want to have in our museum all of your gods first, arms, tools, household utensils; in one word nothing should be missed.” For Planque, assembling a representative host of objects for display allowed the mission to accomplish two goals: The first was to educate the French public about the perceived cultural and religious state of people living in Africa as the SMA saw it. The second was to bolster support, often financial, to help grow the mission’s efforts in West Africa. His indiscriminate attitude toward the kinds of objects sent to the museum reveals that Planque viewed the objects as ethnographic materials rather than art. The objects displayed in the museum served as quasi-scientific evidence of both the need for and the success of the SMA’s work.

The museum’s updated objective, as stated on its website prior to its closure in November 2017, was: “to give value to the cultural diversity of West Africa between the 19th century and 20th century, all while emphasizing the universality of certain practices and beliefs. The exhibited objects bear witness to a common past shared by France and Africa.” Although the language used on the website emphasizes “cultural diversity” and other words and concepts familiar to an early twenty-first-century audience, the statements presented online perpetuate the mid-nineteenth-century idea that the objects collected and exhibited in the museum function as representations of the SMA’s engagement with and impact on communities in Africa. The tone of the museum’s statement permeates the structure and content of the museum’s catalog cards.

As the information and museum studies scholar Hannah Turner demonstrates in her study of museum records at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, data contained in museum records are often assumed to be neutral or to reflect an impartial truth. Yet, as Turner argues, the data that museums record and preserve are “an embedded institutional practice, [helping] cement narratives that have assisted in erasing, or at least hiding . . . subaltern narratives . . .” The subaltern narratives that Turner refers to include the histories of indigenous communities, especially communities that experienced the removal of objects without the makers’ or owners’ consent. In recognizing that museum records help to construct and communicate narratives that reflect the cultural values and assumptions of their institutions, Turner urges readers to consider the stories that have in turn gone untold. Like Turner, I will demonstrate how the catalog cards from the Musée africain de Lyon in France, accessed 2017, https://www.musee-africain-lyon.org/collections/history.html. The museum’s updated objective, as stated on its website prior to its closure in November 2017, was: “to give value to the cultural diversity of West Africa between the 19th century and 20th century, all while emphasizing the universality of certain practices and beliefs. The exhibited objects bear witness to a common past shared by France and Africa.” Although the language used on the website emphasizes “cultural diversity” and other words and concepts familiar to an early twenty-first-century audience, the statements presented online perpetuate the mid-nineteenth-century idea that the objects collected and exhibited in the museum function as representations of the SMA’s engagement with and impact on communities in Africa. The tone of the museum’s statement permeates the structure and content of the museum’s catalog cards.

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Africain de Lyon privilege a moment of shared interaction between France and Africa (an already uneven comparison given one is a country and the other a continent) and construct a narrative that emphasizes the role of the SMA over that of the makers, owners, and other participants in the earlier lives of the objects.

The *Mapping Senufo* project directors selected this museum for our study in part because of the large number of Senufo-labeled objects in its collection. According to Père Pierre Boutin, a former director and archivist at the Musée Africain de Lyon, the museum held about 760 objects labeled as Senufo.21 When they visited the museum in March 2016, Gagliardi and Petridis photographed only those catalog cards containing place-based information, narrowing our dataset to 344. From the photographs, the cards appear to be the size of a large postcard. They contain preprinted fields to capture information, such as the object’s dimensions, its name, a visual description, and its physical location in the museum’s collection. Each card corresponds to a single object, and the information on it was apparently filled in by the hands of the Catholic missionaries and other individuals working for the museum. I began my work by transcribing the information in its original French from the photos of the handwritten cards into a Word document. Then I translated the text from French into English, before entering the translated information into the relational database built by other members of the team.22

By the time I had finished entering the data into the project database, the project team realized that a map was not the best way to display the information written on the cards. The nature of the place-based information recorded in the pre-printed fields “Ethnicity,” “Country,” “Region,” and “Locality” was ambiguous.23 Did these fields refer to the site where the object was originally made? Or did they refer to the site where the object was acquired by a missionary? We also could not be sure whether the reported information was gathered in Côte d’Ivoire at the time of an object’s acquisition, or whether the object was assigned the geographic details later. Ambiguity constituted one challenge in evaluating the data; inconsistency proved another challenge. Some cards showed all three fields completed, while others had just one or two filled, and still others left the fields completely blank.

The team grappled with how to map ambiguous and inconsistent data. For our project, we recognized that the objects with ambiguous or missing information were just as important as the objects assigned specific locations. What gets left out can tell us just as much, if not more, about the character and quality of a dataset.

The cards reflected other gaps and ambiguities beyond the ones in the place-based information. There were no fields to capture data pertaining to the makers of the objects. Yet there is a pre-printed field to record the names of the individuals who acquired the objects. This imbalance struck me as significant. As a scholar of modern European art history, I find that most works in the field have names attached to them. And for art produced in Europe with named artists attached to it, the convention is to privilege the artist’s name, dates of birth and death, and nationality. Even when a specific artist’s name cannot be identified, object records and museum wall labels still recognize the unknown artist’s agency by using markers such as “unidentified artist” or the name of a workshop or affiliated teacher in place of the individual’s name. For example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City uses terms like “Unidentified Artist,” “Unidentified Designer,” and “Unidentified Photographer” in its online collection to identify unknown makers. A search for the term “unidentified” will result in all three terms divided further by nationalities when

23 I have translated these fields from their original French: “Ethnie,” “Pays,” “Région,” and “Localité.”
known: 16 works online for “Unidentified Designer, French,” 44 for “Unidentified Designer, German,” and so on.24

By not including a field for the maker’s name on the catalog cards, the cards’ authors erase the contribution of the maker or makers to the objects’ lives.25 Instead, the authors emphasize the names of the collectors—most often the white Catholic missionaries. As Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein assert in their book Data Feminism, “. . . it’s important to ask whether it’s the categories that are inadequate, or whether . . . it’s the system of classification itself. Lurking under the surface of so many classification systems are false binaries and implied hierarchies.”26 The imbalance of information recorded on the museum’s cards is both a reflection and a perpetuation of one such hierarchy. The history of the objects’ acquisition by the missionaries is privileged above the history of the objects’ production, use, and display in Côte d’Ivoire.

Not only would a map not effectively communicate the uncertainty of the place-based data, but it also would not highlight the apparent imbalances in the knowledge captured on the cards. In the introduction to her book on the nature of data, the information studies scholar Christine Borgman writes, “Data have no value or meaning in isolation. . . . They exist within a knowledge infrastructure—an ecology of people, practices, technologies, institutions, material objects, and relationships.”27 Data are produced within a particular network of individuals whose ideas, goals, and assumptions inform the collection, representation, and interpretation of those data.

The knowledge infrastructure around the Senufo-labeled objects in the Musée Africain consists of dominant and absent voices across different contexts. The dominant voices include the people who collected the objects, authored the records, and maintained the museum and archives where the objects and records were held. The absent voices in the infrastructure include the people who made, used, or circulated the objects prior to their acquisition by a collector in Côte d’Ivoire. By examining the data contained in the object records within the context of the knowledge infrastructure that produced them, it became clear that the data reflect more about that network of dominant voices than they do about the lives of the objects that they purport to capture. How could I reveal this knowledge infrastructure through my visualizations? And what kind of visualizations would help me to represent simply and effectively the power imbalances in the object records?

Visualizing Imbalances in the Knowledge Infrastructure

Leaving the place-based information to one side, I decided to focus instead on how to clearly visualize the imbalance of information concerning individuals’ names. I turned to the free, interactive data visualization software Tableau to help me achieve my new goal. Tableau offers a variety of modes of representation that one can experiment with in quick succession, a feature that I found important at this stage as I was uncertain about what kind of representation would most effectively convey my findings. For the first visualizations I made, I selected rectangles of different sizes and shades. Figure 1 shows the data recorded about the names

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25 I recognize that the importance of makers’ names is debated in the study of historical African arts. On the one hand, scholars like Alisa LaGamma argue that the lack of preserved makers’ names is a direct result of the acquisition of objects by Western collectors. LaGamma urges researchers to attend to these gaps to dispel the biases of the Western collectors and to recognize how objects embody the creative labors of a specific maker or makers. On the other hand, scholars such as Susan Mullin Vogel argue that makers’ names are not necessarily perceived as relevant to the object by the communities in which the maker produced the work. By insisting that makers’ names are a significant attribute, Western researchers impose their assumptions about authorship onto these objects. Whether or not the names of the object’s makers in the Musée Africain would have been considered important by local audiences, it stands that the missionaries assumed that their names were not worth recording. I will also demonstrate later in my discussion of one maker that it is possible that for at least some of the works’ makers, name recognition played a role in their business and thus would be important to preserve. Alisa LaGamma, “Authorship in African Art,” African Arts 31, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 18-23. Vogel, “Known Artists,” 45-55, 93-94.
of collectors. As Père Pierre Boutin, the former museum director, collected the largest proportion of the objects, at a whopping 209 out of 344, his name appears in the largest and darkest rectangle. The smaller and lighter the rectangle, the fewer number of objects collected by the corresponding individual. Figure 2 shows the recorded names of makers, using a similar strategy. Out of 344 object records, 318 list no makers’ names. Through comparison of the two visualizations, I aimed to quickly show viewers that the cards identify the collectors’ names more often than they do the makers’ names.

I shared the two visualizations with participants at KairosCamp, a two-week National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities hosted by West Virginia University in the summer of 2018. The participants included data specialists, computer scientists, librarians, and humanities scholars working on their own digital projects. The group was largely unfamiliar with both the Mapping Senufo project and African arts. After showing my examples to them, I learned that my visualizations were not easy to read. The audience felt confused by the use of the same color to identify both the name of the individual who collected the most objects and the unidentified names of the makers. The placement, font size, and color of the text, particularly in the dark blue rectangles, also made the words in the rectangles difficult to read.

Returning to Tableau, I experimented with color, shape, and text to create new visualizations using the same data. Figures 3 and 4 show the revised visualizations that I brought to the workshop participants for additional discussion. The visualizations represent the data using circles instead of rectangles. The size of each circle decreases in proportion to the number of objects either made or acquired by a particular individual, depending on whether the visualization refers to makers or collectors. I also used the same color to show unrecorded names in each category. The KairosCamp participants found the revisions helpful, reporting the ability to quickly compare the number of unrecorded makers’ names to the number of unrecorded collectors’ names.
Figure 2. Visualization using rectangles to show the proportion of 344 Senufo-labeled objects produced by different makers for the Musée Africain de Lyon. The largest rectangle represents 318 objects for which no makers’ name was recorded. Source: Visualization by Caitlin Glosser using Tableau Public.

Figure 3. Revised version of the recorded collectors’ names visualization using circles. The circles decrease in proportion to the number of objects collected by each individual. Source: Visualization by Caitlin Glosser using Tableau Public.
They recognized the striking difference between the 318 unidentified makers and only 30 unidentified collectors.

The discrepancy between the sizes of the circles for the unidentified makers and unidentified collectors struck the workshop participants in a way that the different sizes of rectangles had not.

The different responses to the visualizations I received signaled to me that the scale of the problem combined with my ability to communicate the scale of it effectively through visualizations mattered. As D’Ignazio and Klein argue in their discussion about structural inequality in data, scale matters because inequalities in information “can seem anecdotal until they are viewed as a whole.”28 I had explained to the KairosCamp audience that records for historical African arts tend to identify European and North American names more often than African names. However, only when the group saw the circle-based visualizations did they fully register the magnitude of the problem. Feedback from an intelligent but not necessarily informed audience proved invaluable for me in assessing how the visualizations communicated information to people not familiar with challenges in the study of African arts. Because the Mapping Senufo team was so close to the data, we had not realized how confusing the first visualizations were to interpret. Outsiders’ responses helped me to ensure that I used shape, scale, color, and text to effectively communicate the inequalities in the dataset.

The Pros and Cons of Data Visualization

In art history, as with most humanities disciplines, the conventional mode for communicating research is to write an essay explaining one’s data, methods, analysis, and conclusions. Early in the data analysis

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28 D’Ignazio and Klein, “Chapter 4,” in Data Feminism.
process, before using Tableau, I began to write an essay. Looking back at my essay draft today, I see that it takes me more than one page to explain my comparison of data concerning the names of makers and names of collectors. Once I created the circle visualizations, workshop participants only needed a moment to comprehend the same comparison. Moreover, they found the revised visualizations persuasive. Telling them that museums often know more about the people who collected African arts than they do about the people who made the objects did not have the same effect for the workshop participants as seeing the scale of the imbalance for themselves through the visualizations.

The decision to create visualizations rather than explain the data in a more traditional format stems from a desire to show data in the most clean, effective, and revelatory way possible. As statistician Edward R. Tufte has claimed, “of all the methods for analyzing and communicating statistical info, well-designed data graphics are usually the simplest and at the same time the most powerful.”29 As images, visualizations can use form and color to convey information in ways that words or writing cannot. The images make the degree of disparity between the kinds of information recorded and not recorded more obvious and more striking. Furthermore, the images transform gaps in data into actively filled space. The large, red circle both emphasizes the magnitude of the disservice done to the unrecorded individuals and attempts to reclaim space for them in the histories of the objects. Rather than remain as a void or an emptiness, the large red circle brings the absence of the voices in the knowledge infrastructure to the fore.

While the visualizations usefully communicate big picture challenges in the study of historical African arts, they do leave something to be desired. For example, they are impersonal. They do not allow the viewer to learn more specific information about the makers, collectors, or the objects. They do not even show images of the objects that the data concerns. Trying to improve the visualizations to reflect more specificity about either the individuals or the objects was frustrating, as the very source of the data yielded so little insight.

The impersonal nature of the visualizations became a generative problem for the larger Mapping Senufo project. In our efforts to visualize the Musée Africain’s data, the team realized that the project had begun to shift towards a study of the nature of data to the exclusion of objects and individuals. We also realized that the summer 2018 workshop audience needed the specificity of narratives about individual people and objects to clarify the significance of the project. On the one hand, the visualizations offer a potential creative solution to the problem of acknowledging the agency of unrecorded individuals in the production of African arts. On the other hand, the visualizations revealed limitations of larger datasets to zero in on human elements and specific stories. As a result of our experiments with the Musée Africain data, conversations about the visualizations helped the team to refine the project’s research goals.

Today, the goal of Mapping Senufo, according to Gagliardi, is to produce a digital conceptual map that “examines how particular objects, images, people, and events contribute to the historical construction of a category of art we know as Senufo.”30 Through its multimodal format, the project will “invite readers to focus on elements that capture their attention and pursue connections that interest them,” revealing to readers their own participation in the knowledge building process or what Borgman refers to as the knowledge infrastructure.31

### How Distance Can Foster Closeness

As I have shown, adopting a distant view of the Musée Africain data had its benefits, including the creation of a visualization that efficiently communicated one example of the problem of silences in museum records. However, a distant view of that data made it difficult to maintain the specificity of

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30 Gagliardi, “Mapping Senufo,” 146.
31 Ibid.
For me, the question then became, how can I bring the visualizations back to an individual story? And can I find a narrative thread within the dataset that will allow me to move beyond just emphasizing the absent voices?

Returning to the visualization of recorded makers’ names (Fig. 4), the group of small green circles represents the 26 times the records indicate a maker’s name. In total, there are 10 different makers’ names recorded. As there was no pre-printed field on the catalog cards to capture this information, the names appear in different places depending on the card. The reader must do the work of spotting and recognizing the names as names of makers. For example, the sculptor Fobé-Soro’s name appears under the field “Technical Data.” Bèma Coulibaly, Coulibaly Zié, and Sugalo Touré are recognized as makers in the “Collected by” field.32 Sometimes the field “Fabricant” or “Maker” is added by hand on the back of the cards. The cards list Bèma Coulibaly’s family in this added field on five of the cards. Boutin identifies Coulibaly’s father as Siriki Coulibaly, grandfather as Tyemoko (Tiemoko) Coulibaly, and nephew as Siribi Coulibaly Koko. In two cases, the field “Scultor” has been added by hand to the front of the card to record the maker’s name Soro Kolo. Other times, no extra field is added to the card. Instead, the reader must read carefully to ascertain that a named individual made the work in question. Although the acknowledgement of the names in a few cases is positive, the fact that they appear in different places depending on the card frustrates efforts to identify individual makers.

By including a field for makers’ names in our database, and then visualizing that information, I was able to see more clearly known presences on the Côte d’Ivoire side of the museum’s knowledge infrastructure. Visualizing the data also revealed an unexpected narrative. The maker identified the most on the 344 cards, having produced 11 works, is a man known as Bèma Coulibaly. His name can be seen in the largest green circle in Figure 4. Bèma Coulibaly’s name also appears in the visualization of collectors’ names (Fig. 3). The records indicate that he collected six objects. A third visualization (Fig. 5) shows the names of individuals described as dealers, individuals who sold works that they did not personally produce to the missionaries. In 37 different instances, Coulibaly is identified as a dealer who sold works to Boutin. Although I had noted Coulibaly’s name in passing as I was transcribing the records, it was only when I began visualizing the data that I realized the extent to which he had participated in the construction of the Musée Africain’s collection. Given that Coulibaly was active in both the production and acquisition of the Senufo-labeled works in the museum’s collection, I argue that he offers one potential avenue for redressing imbalances in the historical record.

The records unsurprisingly do not reveal much information about Coulibaly. Moreover, what they do record, like most of the information on the catalog cards, seems to come to us through Boutin’s experiences, interpretations, and memories. To bring out an Ivorian element in the visualizations, I needed to return to more conventional research methods, ones that would allow me to learn more specific information about Coulibaly and to highlight the objects he makes.33

Figure 6 shows Bèma Coulibaly in 2016 in Dikodougu, Côte d’Ivoire, where he continues to live.

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32 This maker’s name has been spelled in different ways on different cards. Variations of his first name include Sungalo, Soungalo, or Sugalo, and his last name can be found spelled as Tuo, Turé, or Touré. The cards’ authors often spell the same name or word in multiple different ways. Even the spelling of the term Senufo varies.

33 The name Bèma Coulibaly appears in the catalog Art of Côte d’Ivoire for a 1993 exhibition at the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva, Switzerland. I am uncertain as to whether this Coulibaly is the same person as the one referred to on the Musée Africain cards. In the catalog, Jean Paul Barbier notes Coulibaly’s father’s name as “Songi Coulibaly” whereas Boutin notes Coulibaly’s father’s name as “Siriki Coulibaly” on the Musée Africain’s cards. Both Barbier and Boutin describe the families as owners of a brass-casting workshop in Dikodougu. While it is possible the two Coulibalys are the same, I cannot say for sure given the discrepancy in the father’s name. If they are the same person, then Coulibaly’s workshop and an example of his work, a wax mask, are published in the catalog (figures 97 and 120). Jean Paul Barbier, “A Speculative Journey in the Senufo Lands,” in Art of Côte d’Ivoire, ed. Jean Paul Barbier (Geneva: Barbier-Mueller Museum, 1993), 98-99, 112-115.
Figure 5. Visualization of recorded dealers’ names using circles. Béma Coulibaly’s name appears in the second largest circle, having sold 37 objects to Boutin. The largest circle corresponds to objects for which a dealer was not named. Source: Visualization by Caitlin Glosser using Tableau Public.

Figure 6. Béma Coulibaly poses against a wall, holding up a brass face mask that he had recently casted. Source: Photographed by Emma C. Wingfield, 2016.
and work. In the photo, Coulibaly proudly displays a brass face mask that he had then recently casted. In my discussion with textile researcher Emma C. Wingfield, who has met Coulibaly on multiple occasions and commissioned small-scale works from him, she noted that he predominantly produces masks such as the one that he holds in the photo. According to Wingfield, many of the masks that he makes are commissioned by local patrons. She noted that the brass casting industry in the area is no longer as robust as it once was, but local patrons are still aware of individual makers, like Coulibaly and other artists who produce brass objects.

Many of the artists work in the nearby city of Korhogo. From the Musée Africain records, it appears that Boutin commissioned five masks from Coulibaly in 1996, perhaps similar to the one Coulibaly holds in the 2016 photo. Coulibaly also produced other small works for Boutin, including one comb embellished with a mask motif, also commissioned in 1996, and three rings embellished with a buffalo, commissioned in 1976.

The mask that Coulibaly displays in the photo represents a narrow, oval, human-like face. Coulibaly uses simplified geometric features to suggest large, hooded eyes; a slight, linear nose; and a protruding mouth open to reveal teeth. Cicatrization patterns embellish the figure’s cheeks on either side of the nose. Two animal horns spring from the top of the face, surrounding a third pointed projection dotted with upright triangles that extend in a line down to the forehead. Flattened triangles on either side of the face suggest ears, while two long cylindrical forms hang from the chin. Coulibaly carefully defines the mask’s features using small, parallel lines to mark out the ridge of the nose, eyebrows, edges of the face, and crowning projection.

Recognizing the intricacy of the face mask and the labor that Coulibaly devoted to its production represents a step towards returning a human element to the visualizations. I acknowledge that this step remains at a remove from the maker himself and adding his voice to the present side of the knowledge infrastructure. To wholly make visible his presence in the narrative of Senufo-labeled objects at the Musée Africain, one would need to conduct more research on his involvement with Boutin and the SMA, as well as his various roles as a maker, collector, and object dealer.

My perception of the data shifted after spending time looking closely at the mask and considering each element as the result of specific choices made by Coulibaly. Previously, my engagement with Coulibaly and his work only existed in the realm of immaterial numbers. Now, I could better connect those numbers to real, material objects and living individuals. Buried in the process of transcription, data entry, and visualization, the link between catalog cards, single objects, and specific people receded from view, hidden by statistics and charts. Learning about Coulibaly’s artistic practice and catching even just glimpses of his life in Côte d’Ivoire, brought what is at stake—the creative endeavors of real individuals—back into view. Focusing on the data provided an avenue for reframing the biased records and revealing silenced makers’ presences. For me, the impetus for that reframing was made all the more palpable when confronted by Coulibaly’s story.

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34 Author’s interview with Emma C. Wingfield, April 7, 2022. Wingfield is the co-founder of Five I Six Textiles, a company that brings the textiles of a collective of master weavers in northern Côte d’Ivoire to homes around the world in a sustainable and ethical fashion.
35 Wingfield suggested there are multiple different ways patrons commission works from Coulibaly. She explained that sometimes individuals might have older masks that they would like reproduced and might bring images for Coulibaly to reference. In other cases, patrons may have seen Coulibaly’s work elsewhere, and request that he produce something similar. Wingfield interview, April 7, 2022.
36 In her chapter on Albert Maesen, the art historian and anthropologist Anja Veirman briefly discusses how Maesen observed brass casters in the Korhogo region of Côte d’Ivoire during his expedition in 1939. According to Veirman, Maesen recorded that the people he identified as Senufo had a long history of producing brass objects using the lost wax process. Anja Veirman, “Here a boy always becomes a sculptor, like his father’” Albert Maesen and the Study of Senufo Art,” in Frans M. Olbrechts, 1899-1958: In Search of Africa, ed. Constantine Petridis (Antwerp: Etnografisch Museum, 2001): 280-281.
37 Most of the records include a small black and white photo of the object pasted to the top left corner of the front of the card. The photos attached to two of the records for objects commissioned from Coulibaly (record numbers 124.942.008 and 124.942.009) display face masks that share features with the face mask that Coulibaly holds in the photo, such as narrow, oval bases embellished with simplified geometric features and two horns. When Boutin has commissioned a work from Coulibaly, he notes the commissioning in the “Collected by” field, including the price he paid for the object.
38 Boutin purchased two other works made by Coulibaly in 1978, a chameleon-shaped pendant and a ring embellished with a lizard. It is unclear whether Boutin commissioned these two objects or whether Coulibaly made them of his own agency. The cards clearly state that Boutin commissioned (“commandé”) the nine works listed above, whereas they note that Coulibaly made (“réalisé”) or cast (“fondé”) the pendant and ring the same year that Boutin acquired them. While it is possible that Boutin also commissioned these two objects, the shift in language is ambiguous.
Finding one or more individuals to highlight can help researchers and audiences better connect with data by revealing that the large-scale archival silences represent a multitude of individual histories. As D’Ignazio and Klein point out, methods for collecting and analyzing data can obscure “voices in the service of clarity, cleanliness, and control.” To fight this erasure, they urge scholars and data scientists alike to “embrace pluralism” in a way that “centers the standpoints of those most marginalized, empowers project participants, and builds new relationships across lines of social difference.”

Visualization of the Musée Africain records allowed me to find erasures, and to consider how the erasures both reflected and perpetuated assumptions about race and artistic production on the continent of Africa. The visualizations also illustrate that the gaps or silences in the museum’s data represent a series of marginalized participants in the collection’s knowledge infrastructure. The inclusion of Coulibaly’s narrative, however partial, reflects an effort to redress one of the silences revealed by the Tableau visualizations.

Conclusion

Juxtaposition of data visualizations with the photo of Coulibaly and his work demonstrates how the combination of distant analysis and close looking can produce a critical narrative that exposes and subverts structural biases in museum records. Together, data analysis, digital visualizations, research, interviews, and formal analysis offer an accessible argument about the scale of silences and the individuals who have been silenced. The visualizations also helped an intelligent but not necessarily informed audience to easily digest the problem of silences in the records, while simultaneously highlighting for them the magnitude of the problem. The addition of Coulibaly’s narrative to my research brings the big picture back to a specific instance, a story that reframes the issue in terms of a single individual. By adopting a digital approach to art history, I creatively addressed and communicated the problem of silences in the Musée Africain de Lyon’s records to disparate publics, and enabled an initial study of an individual narrative central to the collection’s history.

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39 D’Ignazio and Klein, “Chapter 5,” in Data Feminism.
40 Ibid.