Throughout history, there have been times when art seems to repeat itself. It is not to say, however, that the art is an exact replica of an earlier piece of artwork. The art may be perceived as similar, though. Although many cultures use syncretism in their art and culture, which is the merging of two or more cultural art forms to create a new and unique form of art, evidence of this is lacking when comparing artwork from Benin, Nigeria and a similar piece of artwork by Rainer. Many believe that members of the Benin Empire developed techniques for casting bronze statues on their own, without western influence. In fact, when the British forces invaded Benin City, they were surprised that such a primitive society had the ability to create such astonishing pieces of art in bronze. The British believed that people from other countries, such as Egypt or Portugal were the ones who created the sculptures, and not the people of Benin. The actuality is that there is not sufficient evidence proving that the two regions did not have direct contact, and this makes the similarities of the society’s artwork even more remarkable.

A wonderful example of the striking similarities of art from two different cultures without substantiation of direct knowledge of each other’s culture is a comparison of Altar to the Hand and Arm (ikegoba) from Benin, Nigeria, created from bronze, possibly around the seventeenth to eighteenth century, with the Baptism of Christ by Rainer of Huy, from the baptismal font in Liege, Belgium, from around 1107-1118 C.E. When thinking of the two areas of the world, Africa and Europe, one may not even consider the possibility that there could be any significant similarities between the two pieces of art. Although it may be easier to observe the differences, some of the similarities are just as striking.

Concerning these two vessels, it is obvious that they both possess a basic cylinder shape, which contain two registers for the narration. Many people could look at the Altar to the Hand and Arm (ikegoba) and the Baptism of Christ and comment that they both have people on the first register, and animals on the bottom, smaller register. However, one has to look beyond these initial observations to see the remarkable similarities in detail. Concerning the first register, the human figures in both works of art are arranged in a hierarchical composition, where the main focus of the sculpture is prominently displayed larger than the other figures that flank the central character to the left and right.

The hierarchical composition is easily seen on the Altar, since it is what many consider to be typical. The main focus, in this case the king, is not only in the center of the register with his court flanking him on both sides, but he is also the largest figure positioned in the register. However, on the baptismal font, the hierarchical composition is not as pronounced. The center portrait of Christ is also flanked on both sides, as the king is. Though, the figure of Christ, at first glance, seems to be quite a bit smaller than the other figures. If a person steps back and studies the larger picture rather than focusing only on Christ Himself, the eye is drawn upwards. What is then revealed is an angel directly above Christ at the top of the register. The angel is depicted looking down at the baptism with its head bowed. Observing closer, the angel is connected to Christ through two “rays” that meet Christ’s halo, thus making this whole connected figure the highest figure in the register.

Upon examining the artist’s representation of the other figures on the first register in the Altar, they are shown through only a frontal profile on a single plane. Other than the position of the hands, there are hardly any other differences in the figures. The cylinder shape of the vessel is mimicked in the form of the humans. The cylinder shape is seen in the heads, torso, hips and legs of each person. The disproportional, large head relative to the size of the body is striking. The facial characteristics are enhanced, especially the large almond-shaped eyes, which may remind one of a mask used in ceremonial rituals. The lines are harsh, almost crude. There are some decorations featured in the clothing, but it does nothing to enhance the flow of the garment. The garment is stiff, as is the position of the people. The technique of portraying people greatly differs on the baptismal font.

Rainer of Huy incorporated different shapes and used softer lines to create, what many believe, a more eye appealing depiction of humans, rather than the repetitive frontal figures in the African Altar. The use of cones, diamonds, circles, ovals, and rectangles, in the baptismal font, presents the onlooker with many avenues to examine.
Most of the people are featured from a side profile or a three-quarter profile. Christ is the only figure with a frontal profile. This also makes Him almost pop out of the register in a gesture of welcoming the observer through the position of his hands. Unlike the king on the Altar, who seems to be portrayed as powerful, fearful, and unwelcoming. The king seems almost unapproachable, whereas Christ seems to want you to come to Him.

There are at least three planes used on Baptism of Christ, compared to the single plane on the Altar. The varying planes are clearly seen on the Baptism just to the proper left of Christ with the angels, as they are arranged as one standing behind the other. The western medieval sculptor idealized the body and faces of the people, and even the oxen in the second register. The soft lines of the garments give a sense of movement and softness to the fabric. As one angel is holding Christ’s garment for Him, the lines in the clothing create the illusion of the cloth hanging free. Christ is featured in water that only surrounds Him, as if the water formed a mound. Uneven lines in the water also give a sense of movement. There are at least two trees to help separate the baptismal scene. The tree to the proper right of the scene arches out ever so slightly away from the font before it reattaches itself to the vessel. The tree on the proper left has intertwining branches. However, the trees are reaching upwards, still carrying the eye with them.

The softness in the lines is repeated on the bottom register of the Baptism of Christ. Both pieces of art have animals on the bottom. The baptismal font features four sets of three oxen. Each set is presented in a pattern. On each set, the center ox has a frontal position. The outer two have their heads turned away from the center. They are depicted as if they are standing in the stall, with an empty stall separating each set. The base of the font appears to have slight nicks caused by oxen walking in and out of the stalls. Just as the soft lines are repeated on the baptismal font, the harsh lines are repeated on the second registration of the Benin Altar. Repetition is used in the form of animals and hands. All the animals on the Altar are depicted from a frontal position. The animals are, however, each facing toward the center, which in turn, draws the eye to the center of the piece. On the edge of each register, there is a rope design added for decoration.

With the similarities and differences of these two pieces of artwork explained thus far, comes the next question as to why there are such striking differences in the two relief sculptures. What are these sculptures meant to represent? Why does Benin’s Altar use such strong, harsh, repetitive figures compared to that of Rainer’s use of flowing, interlocking shapes and figures on the font? The answer may come by looking at the culture and society in which the two were created.

Benin’s king is depicted as a powerful figure to be feared. His chiseled harsh lines are meant to represent his strength. His physical powerful attributes were a sign of his ability to lead his people. Anything less would be a sign of weakness, which would lead to his demise, not only outside his kingdom, but also within his own society. By appearing unapproachable, it would be a sign that he possesses the power to protect his people from enemies who would like to see the kingdom destroyed.

Rainer’s baptismal font is more welcoming. Although Christians believe that through Jesus one is protected from evils of the devil, Christ is not portrayed as a fearful figure. This has a lot to do with the function of the baptismal font. Through baptism, a person is welcomed into the family of Christ and his followers. The techniques on the Baptism of Christ are used to create a welcoming atmosphere within the sculpture. Since Christ is not a person who needs to be feared, softer lines are used to make Him approachable.

Art reflects not only the time and function for which the piece was created, but also the beliefs and culture of a society. What is important to a society and its culture is often represented in the artwork. The excitement comes from examining the art of the past to gain a better insight to the cultures throughout history. Being able to notice not only the differences in art, but its similarities as well, allows the art to reveal its secrets of the past to its observer. Through the observation of these details, one may discover that the art from differing societies may be strikingly similar as they are different.

1 http://www.rebirth.co.za/sculpture/bronze.htm