

Surfaces on African sculpture

Review of:

Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture edited by Leonard Kahan, Donna Page, and Pascal James Imperato in collaboration with Charles Bordogna and Bolaji Campbell with an introduction by Patrick McNaughton. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009. 523 pp., 67 col. Plates, 52 b&w illus., \$75.00 hdbk, ISBN 2008029357

The topic of the biography of objects is an interesting area of art historiography, a point of intersection between the individual histories of things and the wider socio-cultural chronologies which are the more familiar terrain of the discipline. *Surfaces* makes the sustainable claim that in African Art studies this is an overlooked area. Much effort, it is argued, has been directed to the topics of form and function to the exclusion of the role of surface in conveying information about the status and meaning of objects. Where, however, the surface of an object has attracted more attention, it has tended to focus on a small number of better-known examples – most notably perhaps medico-magical objects such as *nkisi*, the nailed ‘power figures’ of the Kongo peoples on the western seaboard of equatorial Africa. It is true that no overall consideration has been given to the topic since the entirely admirable catalogue/book by Arnold Rubin *African Accumulative Sculpture*, published well over three decades ago in 1974. Thus there is reason for positive discrimination and to focus on surface and its significance alongside form in interpreting African objects.

But if object biography is of interest to art historians, so too it has resonance for anthropologists, artists, art restorers and connoisseurs - all of whom are represented in one way or another amongst the contributors to this edited volume. The book has two kinds of essays. It begins and ends with survey chapters by Leonard Kahan and Donna Page, both with academic leanings but the one an experienced former gallery owner, the other a practising artist. It is hard to flaw the thoroughness of the literature search each has clearly carried out. The concentration is very largely on West Africa and the Congo Basin - at least partly in response, no doubt, to the focus on sculpture and its characteristic areas of distribution on the continent- and to sources which are mostly in English. Indeed where the authors move beyond these parts of the continent their grip on the literature becomes at times a little shaky – the Azande who live along the South Sudan, north east Congo and the Central African Republic borderlands are, for instance, misplaced well to the south in Zambia. But it would be churlish to dwell on occasional lapses in essays which are full, extensive and informative. They allow a kind of generic biography of objects to emerge which tune the reader in to the implication that the applications of colour, encrustation, or a shininess that comes from use all play a role in imparting to the object a distinctive personality and often a discrete ‘force’. Clearly surface is not about decoration but about empowerment through both metaphoric and metonymic means. Indeed patterning, to the extent that it is only a

decorative technique (which in itself is surely questionable), is hardly dealt with at all.

The documentary style is continued by Page in a concluding chapter and in an extensive appendix which concerns the nature of the substances and pigments applied and the different woods used in carving. These are arranged alphabetically and draw together ethnographic and scientific analyses in a compendium of a kind rarely seen assembled in this detail. Details of preparation methods, geographical range and symbolic implications are included. For those with a conservation focus this is all useful information and combined with the opening chapters compels intellectual and ethical questions about the role of museum conservation practice in preserving what otherwise might be seen as dirt and accretion. Indeed, the volume is exceptionally well illustrated with objects, all from private collections; and it is not clear to what extent current or previous owners outside the continent have not been tempted to impose a different aesthetic on the objects by altering their surfaces to cohere with their own expectations and preferences.

The core of the book consists of three sophisticated essays which take up the themes with reference to particular peoples; and it is here perhaps that the depth and richness of the subject are most evident. In a set of suggestive analyses Pascal James Imperato discusses the treatment and significance of surface of Bamana sculpture (from Mali), Charles Bordogna does the same for Yoruba twin figures (*ibeji*) in Nigeria and Bolaji Campbell explores the perception of colour on sculpture, shrines and textiles associated with the Yoruba divinities known as the *orisa*. Amongst the Bamana the efficacy of an object is related to its absorption of vital energies (*nyama*). The object itself already possesses such forces which are present in the wood itself and released through the process of carving in an appropriate ritual manner. This is enhanced through colouring and through encrusting the surface with sacrificial materials, excreta (which itself contains the *nyama* of the body from which it has been excreted), shea butter and other substances. And it is also derived from the effects on patination which comes from the perspiration, breath and saliva which leave their imprint on masks and figurative sculpture when in use. Age is a virtue since it represents the accumulated infusion of force through use - even well-patinated local repairs are revered.

The question of colour is complex, more complex than some of the authors in this volume sometimes allow. Both Imperato and Campbell get to the heart of the problem. The basic colour triad of African objects is red, black and white. Conventionally this is understood to correspond to different kinds of force or power (impassioned, dangerous, cool, authoritative and so forth), correlated with the products of the body (blood, sperm, milk, excreta, skin colour etc), with the different periods of the day and night, with seasons, temperature and so forth. Colour terms are clearly conceptual as much as they are a physical classification. However, even as classification, things are by no means clear. Campbell talks of an experiment in Yorubaland, southern Nigeria, in which he created a chart of 120 hues and conducted extensive research into the vocabularies used to discriminate between different chromatic groupings. In the late 1970s the French anthropologist Serge Tornay did a similar thing using a paint company's colour chart whilst conducting his own research amongst pastoralist peoples on the southern Ethiopian, South Sudan and northern Kenyan borderlands. The resulting edited

study, *Voir et Nommer les Couleurs* (1978) shows from other parts of the world the same basic point that colour is not a given property of nature but is culturally constructed. Indeed one might even argue that red is one of the only colours with a clear referent in nature, that of blood; but then blood itself has no consistent colour depending on its freshness. And it can stand not for a single spectrum of colour but for all colours - it can refer to things that are 'colourful' where white or black may refer to things that are 'colourless'. Colours conventionally identified in English as green, blue, brown, yellow etc are often seen not as colours in their own right but as part of the spectra of the tripartite colour classification.

This, then, is a book which eloquently illustrates its theme and has many stimulating passages. But, that said, much of the text does so in a largely descriptive vein; there is no substantive underlying argument beyond the validation of the significance of surface in writings of an ethnographic or art historical kind about a range of sub-Saharan cultures. Question marks do not figure in the punctuation. Actually, this is not at all unusual in works on African arts in general which are largely un-theorised by comparison with the stimulating literature that has developed, for instance, on the arts of Oceania, let alone on those of Europe and America. True, there is passing reference (in the introductory remarks by Patrick MacNaughton) to Arjun Appadurai's well-known work on the 'social life' of objects. Clearly this does give a useful context to the thesis of a book that asserts that objects have important biographies which can be read through close attention to their physical surfaces. Arguably, however, the point remains under-developed. Likewise Alfred Gell's writing on agency, which has been such a prominent provocation to insightful thinking in writings about art over the past 10 or 15 years - or from an earlier decade David Freedberg's on the power of images - are not cited. No doubt those with wider interests would have their own suggestions about other appropriate theoretical settings. It is, in short, a book which is rich in implication but set largely within the context of an internal dialogue amongst Africanists.

References:

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