

Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire

Review of:

Monica Blackmun Visona, *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010, 216 pp, 41 b/w illustrations (chart, maps, photographs), bibliography, index, \$109.95 US hdbk. ISBN 978-1-4094-0440-8.

I have already reviewed Monica Blackmun Visona's book: *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire*, concentrating on its subject matter.¹ However, this book deserves critical mention in this issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* for its historiographic content.

In Chapters 1-3 of her book, Dr. Visona contributes a critical discussion of approaches to the study of African Art History since the origin of the discipline in the last century. She begins Chapter 1 with a discussion of the relevance of Histories of African Art to other Art Histories: can the same rubrics, theories and methodologies that were developed for studies of Western Art since the 15th Century be successfully applied to African Art? Indeed, can these analytical techniques be applied to studies of art at all times, and worldwide? This question will be argued, and arguable, for some time to come. Even the definition of the term 'art' needs careful rethinking in today's academic world. Returning to expressive material culture (or, as she labels it, "humanity's impulse to manipulate materials to create visually compelling images," Visona concludes that objects and events in different media get different labels in these cultures. However, it seems that for peoples of the Ivoirian Lagoons, 'art' is collectively "the products of talented individuals." Festivals, she contends, should be discussed as performance art, noting that they are often present occasions for the display of visually compelling images (page 4).

Visona's Chapter 2 begins with a chronological discussion of the various approaches to the study of African Art, beginning with the identification of style regions in European publications of the early 20th Century, and the notions of "tribal styles", followed by two schools of American scholarship: Roy Sieber's students, trained at the African Studies Center of Indiana University, and the students of Paul Wingert and Robert Goldwater, both art historians who specialized in the history of European Art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹ Robert T. Soppelsa, 'Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire', *African Arts*, Vol. No. 45, No. 1, Spring 2012, 89-89.

The latter group tended in early days to use the term “primitive,” as it had been used since the early twentieth century by collectors, anthropologists, colonial officers and art dealers. It lumps African Art in with other non-Western arts. This rubric came under severe criticism during the 1960s and subsequently, and has now been dropped from most scholarly publications. However, the tensions between the “primitive art” approach of modernists and the direct studies of African’s arts based on fieldwork by scholars since the 1960s continues to animate the study of African Art to this day. She also notes that the recent Francophone equivalent of Primitive Art, *Arts Premiers*, leads to the same tensions (page 8). A description of her personal research, conducted in the field between 1981 and 1989, and the assumptions that informed it, follows: basically, the assumptions were that all art and performance served a function within traditional lagoon cultures, that each culture had a discreet style that could be identified, and that changes that came with colonialism caused a disruption and deterioration of traditional arts (page 9). Visonà states that these assumptions have all been challenged in recent years. They were based in functionalist and structuralist anthropological theories, both of which came under critical scrutiny with the advent of postmodern thought. Postmodernism, deconstruction and postcolonialism have complicated African Art scholarship in remarkable ways, and the politics and economics of Africa (and the economics of research funding agencies) in recent decades have rendered field studies in Africa much more difficult to realize than they were in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. As a result, American scholars have concentrated more on theoretical analyses, and on studies of contemporary art made by expatriate Africans living in Europe and America (pages 12-14).

Visonà continues with a lagoon-centered discussion of the various approaches to the study of Africa and its cultures (pages 14-25). The earliest scholars approached the subject geographically, noting the physical features of a group’s location, its roads and markets, and the economics and political boundaries of the group. She notes that the marine ecology and physical features of the West African coast resulted in very different histories for the approachable places (the Ghanaian coast) and those of difficult access for Europeans (the coast bordering the Ivoirian lagoons). European descriptions of the region that became known as Ivory Coast don’t predate the late 19th century, whereas descriptions of the Gold Coast date back to Portuguese settlements along the coast from at least two centuries earlier. Access to the lagoon region was easier in the mid-20th century, but political and economic difficulties since 1990 have resulted in much more difficult access. This may or may not have eased since the political calm of the past two years. A second approach was linguistic: what language is spoken by a given group being studied, what terms do they use to describe their arts, and how does this help a scholar to understand their culture(s) more completely? Visonà identifies thirteen discrete languages spoken by lagoon groups, all related but mutually incomprehensible for the most part (pages 18-19), so the language-based approach would be very difficult. However, she points out that objects often appear in European and American

collections labeled only by the language of the group that it came from. In fact, as she notes, these identifications are not always accurate, since they are often provided by runners or dealers: merchants who trade with the producers, but who are not of their cultures. Historical publications by visitors to the region and modern histories by scholars from the region provide further evidence for analysis, as do archaeological and ethnographic research (pages 20-23). Throughout the chapter, Visonà cites excellent examples of the varied approaches that have been applied by scholars in the discipline since its beginnings. Chapter 2 ends with a discussion of very recent developments in the scholarship relating to African Art studies, particularly the field of visual studies, as it is known in Britain. This approach's use of moving images, she feels, might eventually lead to a more productive analysis of moving objects as they appear in performance. However, she feels that visuality in its current state is too concerned with movement and changing images to concentrate on the objects that are in movement. In other words, the obsession with kinesis obviates other concerns.

In Chapter 3, Visonà describes her application of various approaches to her research into Lagoon arts. She begins with a survey of the literature on Lagoon arts and her exploration of the few available written reports and visual images (pages 27-33), then describes the importance of visual and stylistic analysis of specific objects, then narrates her three separate periods of fieldwork between 1980 and 1989 (pages 34-43).

In Chapter 4, Visonà analyzes figurative sculptures in wood in thorough detail. This is the longest chapter in the book, and the most traditional in its approach, in that she attempts through stylistic analysis to identify hands of various wood sculptors (or, one might posit, of workshops of wood sculpture, as has been done for Yoruba and Luba wood sculptures, and very recently, for wood sculptures of the lower, middle and upper Benue River).²

Chapter 5 presents objects of leadership and prestige, and of other media than wood. Visonà's discussion of gold objects and their importance (pp. 121-125) is particularly good, and her critical discussion of Western postmodern theories of art and commodification, and the necessity of adjusting these if they are to be at all applied to the study of Africa's arts (pp. 127-128), is to be congratulated. Her discussion in Chapter 6 of performance studies and the ways in which they can help inform art historical analyses in both African and Western Art studies (pp. 160-161) is also remarkably sensitive.

Finally, her deconstruction/reinterpretation on pages 170-178 of large, voluptuous female carvings from the lagoons, the figures known as *jolies femmes*

² William Fagg's early writings on Yoruba sculpture come to mind, as does Roslyn Adele Walker's *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings*, Washington, D.C., National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1989, Susan Vogel's 'The Buli Master and Other Hands', *Art in America*, Vol. No. 68, No. 5, 133-142, and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Susan Picton's entries on specific Idoma, Tiv and Igala artists in Marla Berns, et al., *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley*, Los Angeles, Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2011, 88-99.

(attributed to sculptor Émile Guébéhi), as they were interpreted by Barbara Thompson for a recent exhibition and publication of women and women's bodies in African Art, begs the question of the usefulness of gender-based approaches to interpreting African Art by Western scholars: the interpretations make sense to gender-sensitive Western audiences, but they can (and do) miss the point completely from the point of view of African audiences and the Africans who purchase and display these sculptures.³

More thorough historiographic essays on African Art Studies have been written: Visonà cites Sidney Kasfir's historiographic essay of 1984 and the two exhaustive studies by Monni Adams and Paula Ben Amos, both published in 1989, as examples.⁴ These have long been cited in the literature, but none is as approachable (or, for that matter, as up-to-date) as Visonà's book. Her use of the first person narrative and the conversational literary tone of the book will make it especially useful for undergraduate audiences. The subject is clearly presented, and her use of first person narrative, complete with numerous descriptions of her personal experiences in the field, keeps the subject interesting and compelling. The book is a welcome, readable addition to the scholarly literature on African Art.

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³ Barbara Thompson, 'Decolonizing Black Bodies: Personal Journeys in the Contemporary Voice', in Barbara Thompson, ed., *Black Womanhood*, Seattle, Washington University Press, 2007, Chapter 9.

⁴ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art', *History in Africa*, Vol. No. 11, 1984, 163-193; Monni Adams, 'African Visual Arts from the Art Historical Perspective', *African Studies Review*, Vol. No. 32, no. 2, 55-103; Paula Girshik Ben-Amos, 'African Visual Arts from a Social Perspective', *African Studies Review*, Vol. No. 32, No. 2, 1-53.