H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Suzanne Blier, ed. *Art of the Senses: African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection.* Boston: MFA Publications, 2004. 207 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87846-659-7.

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Sensual approach

This book was published to celebrate the opening of the new permanent African art galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 2004. The collection consists mainly of artworks collected by Bertha and William Teel, who donated part of their large African and Oceanic art collections to the MFA. The Teels sponsored the installation of the galleries and endowed the MFA's first position of Curator for African and Oceanic art. The catalog presents one hundred and five works as masterpieces. Three essays set the framework for the collection and relate it to its new museum environment, addressing issues of authenticity, collection history and meaningfulness to the African American community.

Although the Teels started their collection of African Art in the 1950s with two Dan masks collected originally by Harley, the earliest collection dates for pieces represented in the catalogue are 1968 and 1969. To a large extent, the collection seems to have been brought together in the 1980s and 90s, that is, fairly recently. This certainly opens up an array of questions regarding authenticity, age, and provenance for the artworks. The first two essays of the book therefore can be read from that perspective. Both address issues intrinsic to discourses on authenticity for African art: patina and pedigree.

With her text on "Ways of Experiencing African Art: The Role of Patina" (pp. 11-23), Suzanne Blier, professor of African art at Harvard, focuses on the materiality of the artworks, addressing the function of patina as evidence for the history of an object. She discerns four qualities as sensory dimensions of art: the symbolic and

aesthetic importance of materials, performance, the significance of the work's collection, and its display history. Following this framework, she discusses the sensory experiences of African artworks in their original context as well as in the Western art environment. In the western view the visual experience is central to appreciation, and therefore enhanced, whereas in African performative rituals or shrines, art objects tend to be less visible if not actually obscured. Other sensory experiences important in shaping an object over time are its olfactory and tactile associations as well as the sound dimension. Blier notes that although these sensual aspects determine the reception of art, they are difficult to convey in words. After describing the various materials and media used for African artworks, she addresses the circumstances of viewing such works in the local context, taking specific examples from the Teel collection, notably the performance of Ci Wara headdresses and Kuba royal masks. In her concluding remarks, Blier discusses the "patina of value" so important in the connoisseurship of African art. Such metaphorical aspects of patination as former owners, exhibition histories, or appreciation by museum curators all add value to an object.

Christraud Geary, curator for African and Oceanic art at the MFA, elaborates on the history of African collecting and exhibiting in the Boston area, placing the Teel collection in this historical perspective. Starting with a review of the first exhibitions and appreciation of African objects as art in the U.S., she narrows her focus to Boston, where the Fogg Museum opened the first exhibition of African and Oceanic sculpture in the area in 1934, draw-

ing on the collection of Harvard's Peabody Museum. The same year the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston featured a show of prints by Alexandre Iacovleff, who taught at the adjacent school of art and today has gained popularity in interested circles because of his 1930s Africanist paintings. The Fogg Museum then staged an exhibition in 1937 on Benin art from the collection of Louis Carré, a French art dealer. In the 1950s and 1960s, the African art market reached Boston and Boris Mirski, a dealer of modern art, started to include African works in his repertoire. The Teels acquired their first masks from Mirski. Their interest was fueled by their professional involvement with art as owners of University Prints, a company specializing in the production of art prints for educational purposes. In 1958, the Museum of Fine Arts organized the exhibition "Masterpieces of Primitive Art" which included 53 African sculptures mostly from West and Central Africa, what was then the "classic canon." After this major success, the MFA installed a small gallery in which selections from the Peabody Museum were shown in changing exhibitions for a ten year period. Starting in the 1960s, the Teels also included African art in the range of educational prints they offered. Geary concludes her informative overview with an insight into the personal aesthetic criteria and preferences of the Teels as collectors and mentions several projects in which pieces from their collection have been included.

The third essay, by Edmund B. Gaither, director of the National Center for Afro-American art in Boston, is devoted to the relation between African and African-American art and the role of African art in the construction of African-American identity. He sees the "artistic arena as a crucial battleground" in the struggle for equal rights by Americans of African descent. He accords African art an important role in their spiritual and psychological recovery from the trauma of slavery and colonialism. African-American interest focused initially on Egyptian art, but in the early twentieth century shifted to West and Central African artistic expressions. This coincided with the Pan-African movement in which African art became the symbolic cultural heritage of black people worldwide. A crucial personality in this process was Alain Locke, esthete, philosopher and, as Gaither names him "godfather of Black Renaissance." He encouraged African Americans to engage with African art and use it as a source of inspiration and strength. In 1927, Locke organized an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago that presented well known African-American artists along with African artworks. In the 1960s, African-American artists began to travel to Africa in the aftermath of independence. Groups of artists such as New York's Weusi Group and Chicago's AfriCobra who shared an interest in African themes emerged on the art scene. Gaither affirms that artists working in the second half of the twentieth century continue to be inspired by African art traditions, citing Renee Stout and her work in relation to *nkisi* figures as an example. He concludes by emphasizing the significance of African art as an index of black creativity and genius.

The catalog section describes the 105 artworks from the Teel collection, giving details about their original use and, where possible, mentioning their collection history. The short paragraphs written by William E. Teel himself in collaboration with Suzanne Blier place the artworks firmly in their original African context. They are accompanied by large photographs that depict some of the objects from more than one angle.

On the whole, I think the authors have accomplished the difficult task of writing in an original and effective way another book on a collection of African art. Instead of introducing the collection by giving yet another general overview of African art traditions, they focus on topics relevant to the locale where the collection has settled, and address such issues of general interest as the question of authenticity and the significance of African art for the African-American community. This makes the publication valuable for both a local interested public and a wider audience. The essays are also intimately linked to the gift of a private collection of recent composition in a city with a large African-American community, the opening of the new galleries, and the curatorial appointment. The range of published artworks highlights various problems associated with collecting African art at this time. Missing indications of provenance along with vague timelines of production make evaluating the works very difficult. The growth of interest in African antiquities dating to the 1950s and even back to the 1930s has resulted in reproductions and copies flooding the market today and the falsification of provenance. Not only are African origins faked, but the names of former owners left deliberately vague with the wording "private Belgian collector" being still an effective tool of valorization. Detecting whether or not a work is a fake, a copy, or authentic is increasingly difficult. Nor is the patina of much use. It is time to face up to the problem. Research in Africa is needed to name the producers of this art, the copies or fakes, and art lovers should distance themselves from ambiguous reproductions. We all know that most of the art objects circulating today were made in the last fifty years, if not right now, so why should it not be possible to find out who the artists are, date the works and study stylistic changes?

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