

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick John Lamp, ed. *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art*. Munich: Prestel, 2004. 301 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7913-3036-5.

Reviewed by Felicia Nwalutu (Independent Scholars)
Published on H-AfrArts (February, 2007)



Re-establishing the Ritual Milieu of African Artifacts: Focus on the Baltimore Museum of Arts

Frederick Lamp's intent in *See the Music, Hear the Dance*, book and exhibition, was to address "the way African works of arts are collected" and "to acknowledge the larger artistic form" (p. 19). Readers will appreciate his effort to capture the complexity of the cultural, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual essence of African art with respect to color, time, and space. He has taken a holistic approach to presentation that addresses several issues often overlooked in the discussion, writing, and exhibition of African material culture both in Africa and overseas.

The selection of objects was based on a full consideration of the African continent, from ancient Egypt in the north to modern Zulu in the south (guided by the Baltimore Museum's collections), and a broad range of media encompassing both ritual and utilitarian art forms. The contributors draw on the complex nature of performance art and ritual in Africa, examining human acts and creative processes that involve not only the senses of sight and hearing, which are privileged in the West, but also those of smell, taste, and touch. They include color, form, space and time, music and dance.

Lamp and his authors describe not only the performance and accompanying rituals but the ambiance created by the drumming, thumping, and clattering of musical instruments; the sound of stamping feet and the rising clouds of dust from dry earth; the play of light, whether the rising or setting of the sun and its creation of silhouettes or the flickering light from torches and bun-

dles of grass; and the pungent smell of perspiration mingled with dust. All this takes place in the midst of cacophonous sounds: human voices screeching, screaming, whistling, yelling or even hooting; barking dogs; cackling fowls; bleating goats; blaring horns; and the roaring of motor-bikes and other vehicles.

In his opening essay Lamp expresses disapproval at the transformation of African art in its move from Africa to museum, specifically the stripping away of embellishment to suit European tastes. Lamp argues that "it is time to show African art in all its complexity in time and space in order that reader and museum visitor more fully enjoy an art that has done so much to enrich our world" (p. 11). Yet he makes no claim of absolute knowledge. As he puts it, "many voices and views have been included here with no goal of absolute truth" (p. 14). He goes on to explain that although ritual may be traditional, "it is the variable acts of real people, with unique intentions, that gives it life in performance and captivates the viewer. Some of these actors live in isolated societies, cherishing ancestral ways and cultural codes while others enthusiastically embrace and adopt the contemporary and global culture of video, TV and hip-hop" (p. 14).

Thirty-eight contributors address one hundred objects, approaching them as case studies within the broad themes that structure the reader's movement through the book (and the viewer's through the galleries) and loosely tie together the eighty-eight essays. Each of these case studies is meant to contribute to a "reconstruction of the

original art form" (p. 29) not merely as specific examples but as part of building a general sense of and appreciation for the way these objects live in their communities. Beyond that, Lamp has ranged widely through the literature to develop the ideas he introduces for each section.

Lamp's "Overture" represents a consideration of the African art object as a fragment in the museums of the Western world. In "Surface Renewal and Identity," the author suggests that the restoration of the surface condition of the objects as they were in their original African contexts should be a museum's first priority. "Accumulative Form and Ornamentation" stresses the importance of accoutrements added to African art objects in terms of their meaning and function. "Costuming, Concealment and Revelation" concerns our willingness to substitute a part for the whole, abstracting a mask from its costume (not to mention display context) or figure from its shrine in our museums. In "Dance, Movement and Gesture," Lamp refutes the generic Western (mis)conception of African dance as a spontaneous improvised performance, noting the importance of structured movement, and the use of space, patterns of steps, and gestures designed specifically for a given artistic effect (p. 69). In "Sound, Music, and Spirit," the authors portray sound as an essential component of every masquerade and vital to rituals involving objects placed on shrines. Like sculpture, sound is demonstrated to be both revealing and indicative, conveying sentiment, shape, energy, and intention. Sound and lyrics may associate a performance with war or trouble. In some cases the music may provoke fear; in others it is offensive and repulsive, suggesting a challenge. It may be used to negotiate, to encourage, or to raise the morale of a group. Some music is meant to entertain, engender pride, or to amuse (p. 223). Some important spiritual manifestations are conveyed solely by sound, having no visible presence. Edward Lifschitz calls it "acoustic masking" while Paul Stoller suggests that hearing occupies a much more critical place in sensory perception in Africa than it does in the West (p. 95).

In "Narrative, History and Message," the authors demonstrate the importance of verbal texts in giving meaning to African art. Thematic headings and successive essays on specific performances help the reader understand that the objects on display in the museum are only a fragment of the original art form as conceived by their African communities (p. 10). In "Audience," Lamp demands we recognize the viewer as not only an active participant but also an indispensable contributor to the event. In "The Associated Objects and the Ensemble," the contributors discuss multiple elements of performance—

singing, drumming, and dancing—woven into an ensemble with such varied authors as Henry Drewal, Tamara Northern, Steven Wooten, and David Binkley examining specific masks and figures in their respective contexts.

"Staging: Space, Architecture and Enclosure" examines the space in which the action takes place, where the stationary objects are kept and on which they depend, revealing the importance of cardinal directions, the positioning of figures, the use of masquerades to define such social spaces as the underworld, ancestral circles, and the home.

"Timing and Duration" essays discuss different aspects of timing not only in the ritual scheduling of masquerades, but in the use of textile and ornaments in a range of different cultures. As timing is critical to performance in Western theater, so is the performance of African art time-specific. Some events must occur only at certain times, such as during a full moon, harvest time, dusk or dawn. Certain shrine rituals might be composed of progressive events over a period of years. Some masks or objects are meant to be seen in a split second once a year, and some every fifteen years; others are permanently displayed for general view and contemplation.

"Lighting (of) and Visual Access," (to) objects, contrary to museum displays where all objects are subject to similar lighting or shades of illumination, differ considerably from culture to culture, event to event. While some objects are meant to shine in bright sun, others are only displayed at dusk or in darkness. Suffice it to say that an African who has witnessed a particular mask perform in dim light might not recognize it spot-lit in a gallery. Philip Dark's remark on the transformation wrought by museums and photographers on African art is worthy of note. According to him, "there is little doubt that clever lighting can bring out in photographs of Benin objects, as of others, qualities which are not there when they are seen face to face in a museum and which are certainly absent in the gloom of a shrine"(p. 219).

Like the sections on timing and illumination, the section on the "Olfactory" seems truly innovative in its focus on aspects of African performance that provide a display context for African objects, but that have been largely ignored by Western museum installations. African ritual leaders understand the power and importance of scent to create a spiritual atmosphere and indicate power, to differentiate rank, to attract the ancestors, or to repel evil forces.

In "Taste, Touch, Feeling and Visceral Sensations,"

the authors look at the intimacy with which African audiences interact with performer and art objects in dance, shrine, ritual and utilitarian contexts. "Serendipity, Improvisation and Creative Agency" focuses on the changes that each performance—and each performer—generate and which provide a context for the many objects we isolate in museums. Museums have paid at least token tribute to the fact that African art events occur not merely in open theatrical spaces but with the contributory inputs of a human crowd, the domestic environment, and weather conditions. Improvisation is only one aspect of change, and change across generations has been explored less frequently in museum exhibitions. Susan Vogel's 1997 *Baule: African Art Western Eyes* presaged in her exhibition of the art of one culture such change, and broached many of the other issues that Lamp has attempted to address here in a much broader African framework.

Lamp's *See the Music, Hear the Dance* makes a most delightful reading in African art studies as it draws an unparalleled picture of the structural components of the material and performance art forms from Africa, as opposed to the lifeless objects on the exhibition stands of Western museums. The lavish illustrations, including at least one field or archival illustration per museum object, would alone be worth the price of the book. The innovative approach and exceptional scholarship represented by Lamp and his array of authors make it a great contribution to the literature. Indeed, with a book that offers so much to scholars and students of African studies, there is little room for criticism.

However, there are two areas where the reviewers' insights may shed more light on the author's discourse. The first concerns comments on Mbari as a sacrificial monument in honor of a deity (p. 69). The construction of Mbari is an expression of the way the people inhabiting the Mbaise, Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu axis in Igboland, Nigeria, viewed their cosmology before the intrusion of colonialism and Christianity. It is therefore the summation of a people's cosmos. An Mbari house itself symbolizes their view of the universe. The molded figures inside—in a ranked order, from top to bottom—represent the various known deities who are invisible, and their relationship with man at the bottom who is visible along with domestic animals, wild animals in the forest, birds, and aquatic life. This whole construct is then dedicated to the Almighty God (Chukwu) who is considered to be The Most High and King, and who has neither altar nor shrine, unlike the deities in Mbari. The deities in the Mbari house are regarded as mediators between man and

God and must receive sacrifice, and so have altars and shrines. This implies that everything inside Mbari, including the house, is subject to the Almighty God, creator of all things and as occasion demands must be presented to Him. That is why the Igbo say that "Mbari is life."

Again Lamp rightly indicates that material art objects, consisting of masked headdresses, and costume of grasses, leaves, fibers and many other elements, often have a distinctive smell, then wonders whether the odor, as well as the appearance, the texture, the color, or other factors, is critical to the choice of materials. The details handed down to the 1979 masquerade initiates in Nteje are pertinent here. Nteje is the headquarters of Oyi local government in Anambra Division of Igboland, Nigeria, and is well known for its masquerading traditions. The 1979 initiation ceremony was presided over by Mazi Ezani Mgboh, a famous mask designer, drummer, and performer (and paternal uncle of Michael Nwalutu, who participated in the ceremony). He is noted among communities that still retain their masquerading traditions in Igboland for his dexterity in the construction of Ijele and Akwunehenyi (giant masquerades), Ikolo and Agbogho *mmo* (young male and female masquerades), Izaga (stilt mask), and the Odogu *mmo* (police mask) costumes. This process marks a transition from childhood into adulthood and is exclusive to male children of the community. It is after this enactment of understanding the "exotic" and symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead (represented by the masquerades in various ritual performances) that a young adult male is recognized in the community and is allowed to participate in various social and communal functions.

In his nocturnal opening lessons and subsequent demonstrations, Mazi Mgboh showed in vivid terms that all the components, colors, and odors of a mask, headdresses, and costumes—irrespective of their material form (and with the exception of perspiration induced odor from the performer's body)—are designed to meet the prescription of the diviners and priests consulted at the initial deliberation held for the construction of the masquerading costume. According to him, apart from entertainment masks, all ritual masks must conform to these prescriptions so that the performer, dancer, or the shrines will be protected from attacks by competitors or afflictions from other malevolent spirits attracted to the scene of performance. He demonstrated this using the constructed nose of a female and male young mask spirit called "Ododo," made from a combination of leaves, grasses, and fiber from the raffia palm that was carefully selected and prepared to help ward off witchcraft attacks

on the performer.

We would not conclude this review without pointing out that despite several editorial oversights in the book, Fredrick Lamp's *See The Music, Hear the Dance* lends so

much to the general understanding of African art and art history. Therefore we recommend the book to art historians, museum professionals, anthropologists, and scholars interested in African Studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

Citation: Felicia Nwalutu. Review of Lamp, Frederick John, ed., *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12869>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.