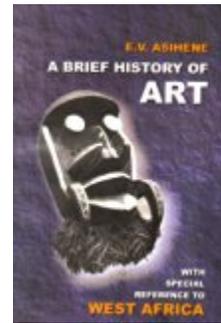


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

E. V. Asihene. *A Brief History of Art with Special Reference to West Africa*. Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2004. xii + 94 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-9964-978-42-6.

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Broad Survey

This brief survey of African art history—divided into nine chapters and an epilogue—is according to the author an attempt “to relate what goes on in the region to art in world history” (p. ix). The first two chapters feature the history and the traditional arts and crafts of West Africa. The historical material is brief, beginning with the Paleolithic era and running through the iron age, focusing on developments in the Near East and Egypt. Chapter 2 consists of a minimal sketch of West African history centered on the Western Sudanic empires and the forest kingdoms. Non-centralized societies are not discussed and visual culture is not a concern. When art forms are included, they are just mentioned. For example, in reference to Yoruba art, Asihene states that “their masks and figures are dramatically designed and colorful. They are full of vitality” (p. 12).

It is in the third chapter that visual culture becomes the focal point. To set the stage for this, Asihene introduces what he calls the traditional systems (p. 13) with a short paragraph on each of the following seven topics: the people; the purposes for which works are created; pacification of the spirit; farming society; religion; kingship; and, music, drama, and display. Very little substantive information is provided. In terms of a work’s purpose, there is no discussion of function or meaning, just a statement that all objects have a definite purpose. The next section of this chapter consists of a vague presentation on art and religion in which the author states that art flourishes “in remote and inaccessible places” (p. 15). The most informative part of the third chapter deals with specific ethnic groups. Beginning in the Western

Sudan with the Bambara (Bamana), who are incorrectly attributed to being of Mende rather than Mande origin, the survey moves randomly through West Africa ending up with Nok. Although this section includes a map, three groups—the Bamana, Dogon, and Bobo—are incorrectly located on it. Only one object type is usually discussed for each culture, such as the Chiwara mask for the Bamana and the Sande society mask for the Mende. In his consideration of various objects, a number of simplifications, mistakes, or misinterpretations occur. The most extensive treatment is given the arts of the Yoruba, but it is not without problems. For example, after presenting Olorun, Eshu, Ifa, and Shango, Asihene claims that “sacred objects...for the worship of these religious deities include masks and costumes for appropriate occasions” (p. 22). This is simply not correct. When the Igbo are mentioned they are referred to indiscriminately as either Igbo, Ibo, or Igbo Ukwu. A three-page chapter 4 entitled “Influences on Art in the West African Region” is divided into five very summary paragraphs on “Islam,” “Christianity,” “The Traditional Artist,” “Style, Forms and Practice,” and “The Cire-Perdue Process.” Asihene begins his discussion on Islam by asserting that Islamic influence on the art of the Western Sudan dates “as far back as the 1st Century A.D.” (p. 24)—five centuries before the birth of Mohammed. The other paragraphs are very general with few specifics except for the paragraph on the *cire-perdue* process. Chapter 5 addresses the cultures and (to a far lesser extent) the arts of Asia Minor, Egypt, and Greece. The discussion is brief and confusing, with some misinformation, especially for the ancient Near East. The Egyptian material is the most accurate, with one work ac-

tually illustrated (the head of Nefertiti). In chapter 6, Asihene presents an historical sketch of European art from the Etruscans to the nineteenth century. The Renaissance section, which includes both Italian and German artists, is the most extensive. Asihene concludes by suggesting “that the interested reader should augment the limited information given in the chapter by reading more from libraries” (p. 47). However, given the library resources in many areas of Africa, a far more focused, informative, and better edited book, especially one published in Africa, would have been more useful.

Modern European art is the topic of chapter 7. Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Surrealism are briefly defined, followed by the names of several representative artists. The chapter follows with notes on Paul Cezanne, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Honore Daumier, and Odilon Redon, in that order. The names, dates, and nationality, along with a title of a work, for twenty additional artists are also cited. Chapter 8, which addresses the issue of art in West Africa today, is fairly general but useful in understanding the dynamics of change in the visual culture of the region. By using a few examples, Asihene explains how the selection of color and design is culturally determined. His discus-

sion of pattern, design, and rhythm is of interest as these characteristics are related broadly to various situations, including how wares and produce at the market are arranged.

The final chapter looks specifically at West African artists and their works. It is the most valuable part of the book, including a short discussion of twenty-two Nigerian and twenty-two Ghanaian artists. Some artists are just mentioned briefly while others are given more extensive background information. In addition, six other West African artists are identified. The only mistake in this chapter is the assignment of two Liberian artists to Francophone regions.

Overall, the book is disappointing. It is much too brief to provide an adequate overview of West African art, much less Western art as well. A thematic, chronological, or issue-driven analysis would have provided a structure for connecting the diverse material in the book, making for a much more useful and meaningful survey. In addition, the editing was inadequate, leaving numerous mistakes uncorrected. That the book was published three years after the death of the author may account for some of the problems. Finally, the book would have benefited from better quality illustrations.

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