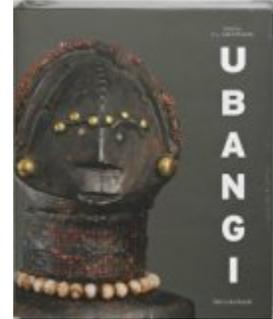


Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, ed. *Ubangi: Art and Cultures from the African Heartland*. Available in English and French. Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2007. 327 pp. EUR 99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-6153-740-3.

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Overlapping and Crisscrossing: An Assessment of Ubangi Art

Ubangi was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title at the Afrika Museum, Berg-en-Dal (October 13, 2007 to March 31, 2008). Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, the editor of the comprehensive catalogue and curator of the exhibition, is an independent curator and an anthropologist who has worked among the Zande in Central Africa. He might be known to many because of his recent book, *Forms of Wonderment: The History and Collections of the Afrika Museum, Berg-en-Dal* (2002), co-edited with Ineke Eisenburger. Grootaers's new work is devoted to the art of an area in Central Africa bordering the Ubangi River and extending over four nation-states: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, and Sudan. Since the art traditions of this region have been largely neglected in the past, *Ubangi* is a more than welcome addition to African art scholarship. The work provides an overview of the art production of such peoples as the Gbaya, Ngbaka-ma'bo, Banda, Ngbandi, Ngbaka-minagende, and Manza, and it places them in relation to the more familiar Zande and Nzakara or Bongo at the eastern border of the area in question. Non-Bantu speakers, these peoples are also connected through languages belonging to the Ubangi language family, speaking dialects formerly referred to as eastern Sudanic. The book is divided into two sections, "Open Borders" and "Colonial Encounters."

The editor introduces the book with a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein to describe the nature of Ubangi sculpture—"a complicated network of similarities over-

lapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' " (p. 9). This well-selected characterization accurately describes the impression of the uninitiated looking at the sculpture published in the volume. The cultural attributions of styles are indeed difficult to discern with only a superficial assessment. The description further holds true for cultural relations between the various populations in the region, which, according to Grootaers, are defined by a lack of "clear-cut social, ritual and artistic identities" (p. 42). Overarching cultural patterns do not result from common origins but rather reflect what the author calls "permeable and inconstant ethnic boundaries" in this area that stretches from southwestern Sudan to eastern Cameroon (p. 42). The styles of Ubangi sculpture, or rather the lack of clearly defined styles, reflect open cultural borders, bringing Grootaers to question, once again, the dictum "one tribe—one style" (p. 55). The lack of clearly defined ethnic styles is a consequence of artistic exchanges across ethnic borders and of shared cultural traditions and ritual objects. Interethnic trade was responsible for the traveling of objects often over large distances in the course of which they were often transmuted.

Another issue at stake here is a narrow perception of authenticity, raised by the author's discussion of several examples of artworks produced for Europeans or inspired by them, such as the well-known and highly appreciated Zande figures once considered by William Fagg

as the epitome of Zande style. Grootaers suggests that these sculptures may have been produced for European patrons based on a figure that he found in the Pitt Rivers Museum in this style but reminiscent of the ironic “colon” figures portraying Europeans (p. 255).

In his introduction, Grootaers further sketches the contexts in which Ubangi sculpture is used and produced. During initiation ceremonies, masks are worn and a variety of figurines were owned and utilized by closed associations with differing purposes. The Ngakola initiation association named after a spirit is found among several Ubangi peoples. Another is called Mani or Yanda and had as its main purpose the dissemination of magic knowledge to ensure well-being among its male and female members. Many figures and ritual objects are known from this society, and their manufacture and function has been well described by the Belgian medical agent Jozef De Loose, who became a member of a Mani lodge in 1954.[1]

Following Grootaers’s essay introducing the first section, “Open Borders,” Raymond Boyd, a linguist at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in Paris who has worked extensively on the Zande language and Chamba-Daka, elaborates on the theme from a linguistic perspective. Herman Burssens, professor emeritus of African art and cultural history at Ghent University who has published amply on the region, gives an overview of populations in northwestern Congo and describes their art production with a focus on figurative sculpture. Although he laments the difficulty in attributing sculpture to the various Ubangi peoples due to the lack of provenance information, he is able to give a comprehensive description of characteristic traits of the sculptural traditions of the Ngbandi, Ngbaka, Banda (Mbanza, Togbo, Gobu, Langbasi), and Ngombe that encompasses both style and contexts of use.

One aim of the book is to discredit the assumption that north Congolese sculpture is unattractive. Therefore, artist Georges Meurant bases his approach not on form, but on what he calls the energy—the aesthetic power—of Ubangi sculpture. In his lengthy elaboration, the author lays out his theory on the aesthetics of these artworks. He sees this art as deeply rooted in its ritual and sacred aura. He also analyzes the “ways of working” of Ubangi craftsmen (p.159ff). This is the only attempt to discuss the producers and manufacture of the objects featured in the book, something about which we know very little. Meurant describes Ubangi sculpture as based on the cylindrical form of the tree trunk or branch “reflect-

ing the natural movement of the material” (p. 159). The patina of use as evidence of the artwork’s cultural function determines the dynamic of its materiality. This adds up to what Meurant calls “energetics,” a consequence of movement in sculptural form in combination with traces of human interaction over time (p.162). Although he recognizes that ethnic attributions must remain hypothetical since most of the Ubangi sculptures turned up on the art market, he tries to identify the general features of Ubangi art and then several ethnic particularities. His attributions are supported by artful drawings that allow a comparison of various known examples grouped according to their regional provenance. Though the individual works are identified, some of the plates would have benefited from a short comment explaining the underlying concept of the groupings.

The second part of the book deals with “colonial encounters.” Grootaers rightfully acknowledges the fact that despite a focus on the aesthetic aspects of Ubangi objects, one has to remember the historical context through which they came to our attention. Thus, he gives an overview of early expeditions and Europeans visiting the region, their publications and collecting enterprises. Christine Stelzig, curator at the Frankfurt Museum of World Cultures, and Beate Schneider, an anthropologist who has worked for the same museum, focus on the second central Africa expedition of the German Duke Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg in 1910-11. This major German scientific venture comprising nine persons, each with a different scientific background, aimed at multidisciplinary research and brought back ethnographic collections now housed at the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology and the Frankfurt Museum of World Cultures. Several of these objects are represented in the catalogue. Also in this section, anthropologist and freelance curator Iris Hahner analyzes hairstyles of the region in the nineteenth century, a salient feature helping to identify regional provenance of many artworks. The final essay of the book, by the Belgian priest and missionary Marcel Henrix who lived with the Ngbaka for over fifty years, is devoted to the Ngbaka and their beliefs and rituals.

On the whole, the catalogue is informative, filled with enlightening historical documentation, and well illustrated with beautiful object photography. The book presents a selection of about 250 objects, the largest group comprising figurative sculpture. In addition, ritual utensils, ornaments, artful weaponry, headgear, and musical instruments are represented. Readers might have appreciated the information concerning the actual location of the reproduced artworks being added directly to

the objects' captions rather than being put in an annex at the end of the book. Despite this minor shortcoming, the Ubangi volume is an important resource, a handbook that will become a classic in the field.

Note

[1]. Herman Burssens. *Yanda-beelden en Mani-sekte bij de Azande (Centraal-Afrika)*, Tervuren: Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, 1962.

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