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Barbara Plankensteiner. *Benin: Kings and Rituals.* Gent: Snoeck, 2007. 535 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-5349-626-8.

Reviewed by Kate Ezra
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The New Encyclopedia of Benin Art

The exhibition "Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria," organized by Barbara Plankensteiner, is an extraordinary opportunity to see hundreds of masterworks of Benin art together in one place. It will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, its only American venue, from July 10 to September 21, 2008. The colossal exhibition catalog provides a permanent record of this remarkable exhibition and will soon become the essential reference work on Benin art, culture, and history. The first half of the book *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria,* edited by Barbara Plankensteiner, consists of twenty-two essays by a world-class roster of scholars on a broad range of topics and themes related to the history and art history of Benin up to the present. These essays, which constitute a veritable encyclopedia of information about Benin art, have already been discussed in a review by Jean Borgatti for the journal *African Arts.*[1] Therefore, I will restrict my remarks to the copious catalog entries that constitute the second half of the book.

This section of the catalog features 301 objects discussed in 205 entries by 19 authors. The objects, all illustrated in full color, are drawn from twenty-five museums in Europe, the United States, and Nigeria, and also include several works privately owned by Oba Erediauwa and High Priest Osemwegie Ebohen of Benin City. Most of the international team of authors who wrote the catalog entries are renowned Benin scholars; the others are Africanists who serve as curators of collections that lent objects to the exhibition. A full half of the entries were written by Barbara Blackmun (forty-nine) , Kathy Curnow (twenty-six), Paula Ben-Amos Girshick (fourteen), and Joseph Nevadomsky (thirteen). These entries, on a wide variety of object types, stand out for the breadth and depth of knowledge gained from decades of work in the field of Benin studies. Also of special note are the entries by Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, Adepeju Layiwola, and Ekhaguosa Aisien. The catalog is not limited to works in brass and ivory, which are the mainstays of exhibitions and publications on Benin art, but includes numerous examples of more rarely seen utilitarian objects, garments, and bead ornaments. Commendably, the catalog includes many objects created after 1897, the year of the conquest of Benin by British colonial forces and often wrongly considered the *terminus ante quem* of Benin art. The contemporary objects attest to the same skill, iconographic and stylistic innovation, and engagement with the kingdom's history and rituals as seen in the catalog's pre-1897 objects.

The catalog entries are arranged thematically into twelve sections, based both on the political and ritual contexts of the objects and the historical periods of their creation or subject matter, each with a short introduction. The first section, "Prologue" (cat. nos. 1-4), provides a brief look at objects from Ife, Owo, and Ijebu, kingdoms that interacted with Benin and whose art traditions are interrelated. One of the new ideas put forth here centers on the current belief by the Benin royal family that brass casting was not introduced to Benin from Ife, but rather the opposite (cat. no. 1). The objects in the second section, "City and Palace" (cat. nos. 5-25), are meant to evoke Benin's architecture and city planning, although not all (e.g., cat. nos. 6-13) directly address this theme. The following section, entitled "Trade with Europeans" (cat. nos. 28-51), focuses on the Portuguese and other Europeans who played important economic and symbolic roles in Benin history and culture. Section 4, "Palace Hierarchy and Court Ceremonial," is by far the largest, with eighty-eight objects (cat. nos. 52-139). It includes a vast array of objects that depict Benin's most important chiefs and priests, and the objects they wear and hold in court ceremonies and rituals. Since the Oba is the pinnacle of the hierarchy, it is odd that he does not appear

until the following section, somewhat like placing middle management rather than the CEO at the top of an organizational chart. The objects and entries that comprise this section are excellent, but the category itself is too large and unwieldy, and smaller, more focused thematic sections might have allowed a smoother narrative and a tighter fit between introductory matter and individual entries.

The king or Oba is the subject of the next section (cat. nos. 140-168), followed by one on the queen mother or Iyoba (cat. nos. 169-180). Both contain the commemorative heads and other well-known types of objects that highlight the importance of these two roles. Among the surprises here are a rare wooden door from the women's quarters of the palace, carved with intimate scenes of royal wives and their attendants (cat. no 180), and an equally charming brass relief plaque depicting a leopard, one of the king's key symbols, with three cubs, all feasting on an antelope (cat. no. 162). Section 7, "Shrines and Deities" (cat. nos. 181-217), underscores the religious basis of the Benin kingdom and is replete with a wide variety of objects placed on different types of altars, vessels for ritual materials, and objects depicting sacrificial animals and fruits. Kathy Curnow was responsible for about half of the entries in this section, which are models in their balance of the general and the specific, and their in-depth exploration of form, iconography, and context. There are some rarely seen objects here, such as the brass rattle staff from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, topped with intriguing images of a snake devouring a human, who grasps a pair of leopards, who in turn hold an elephant in their paws (cat. no. 184). One finds new information as well, such as Joseph Nevadomsky's comment that iron Osun staffs were used as recently as 1948 in political power struggles in Benin City (cat. nos. 201, 202).

Section 8 looks at a seminal period of Benin history and art production, "The Warrior Kings in the Sixteenth Century" (cat. nos. 218-251). Oba Esigie (r. c. 1504-c. 1550) is the focus of many of the entries concerning a magnificent array of brass plaques and figure sculptures, but to me two of the most striking entries concern his father, Oba Ozolua. In one, Barbara Blackmun discusses a relief plaque representing Ozolua with retainers (cat. no. 220). One of the retainers is Laisolabi, a warrior who was such a trusted friend of the Oba that the two men share a single spear, a detail one might easily overlook without Blackmun's help. Despite their close relationship, Laisolabi eventually betrays the Oba, leading to his assassination, in order to put an end to his constant wars of expansion that were a hardship to the Benin people. In the other entry, O. B. Osadolor discusses two brass trophy heads and the oral tradition that attributes their origin to Ozolua (cat. nos. 245, 246). It is this type of specific historical information that makes studying Benin art so rewarding, and that is one of the strengths of this catalog. This is equally evident in the following section, "Internal Conflicts and Reorientation of Kingship in the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries" (cat. nos. 252-269). This section focuses on the remarkable, and often unique, objects that were created in the eighteenth century by the three Obas who restored the power of the king and kingdom after its decline in the seventeenth century. Half of these entries were written by Paula Ben-Amos Girshick, providing a convenient summary of the ideas put forth in her 1999 book *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin.*

The last three sections of the catalog focus on Benin art since 1897. Section 10, "The Fall of Benin" (cat. nos. 270-274), includes a few objects that are among the most moving in the exhibition and are guaranteed to soon be incorporated into college courses on African art. In particular, the brass Boat Composition (cat. no. 273) by the Omodamwen workshop literally recasts the well-known photograph by J. A. Green of Oba Ovonramwen on his way to exile in Calabar. As Layiwola points out in her catalog entry, the Boat Composition restores to Ovonramwen the dignity of his coral bead regalia and underscores the power of art in Benin to capture and crystalize changing views of historical events. The same point is made by Plankensteiner in her discussion of a man's shirt made of cloth commemorating the Great Benin Centenary of 1997, likewise incorporating a photograph of the deposed Oba Ovonramwen. By framing it with more glorious images of his three successors, this textile changes the meaning of the image from one of defeat to one of survival and persistence.

Section 11, "The Discovery of Benin Art" (cat. nos. 275-279), looks at the influence of Benin art on German Expressionist artists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Extending this examination of Benin's impact on modern art to works by African American artists, such as Romare Bearden and Kerry James Marshall, and Benin artists, such as Solomon Wangboje and Erhabor Emokpae, could have told a broader and more interesting story. The final section, "Benin after 1914" (cat. nos. 280-301) includes brass plaques and figure groups made since the Benin monarchy was restored in 1914. These testify to the continued relevance of art in providing tangible, visible form to ideas of kingship, power, and history, the main concern of Benin artists and patrons for over five

hundred years. Again, this commendable feature of the catalog could have been further enhanced with the inclusion of works by some of the wood carvers and academically trained artists who have also been an important part of Benin's evolving art history.

The catalog entries in *Benin Kings and Rituals* are an invaluable addition to the bibliography of Benin studies. They bring together not only objects from many collections but the perspectives of scholars from many disciplines and backgrounds. They will be a welcome resource for students and scholars, curators and collectors. The catalog's quality is only slightly marred by instances of poor translation or copyediting in the English edition. Cross-references, such as to works of the same type or by the same artist, would have been helpful, especially since most readers will dip in and out of the catalog entries rather than reading them from beginning to end. Indenting paragraphs or inserting space between paragraphs would have made reading easier. These minor technical shortcomings aside, *Benin Kings and Rituals* is a remarkable accomplishment, a fitting illumination and celebration of one of Africa's greatest artistic achievements.

Note

[1]. *African Arts* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 92-93.

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