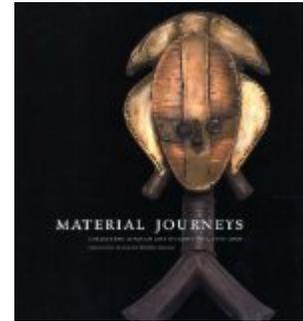


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christraud M. Geary, Stephanie Xatart. *Material Journeys: Collecting African and Oceanic Art, 1945-2000*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2007. Illustrations. 250 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87846-715-0.

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Creation of a Collection

Christraud M. Geary and Stephanie Xatart's book reflects the recent awakening of interest in the history of collecting and the lives and artistic concerns of individual collectors.[1] *Material Journeys* focuses on African and Oceanic art from the collection of Geneviève McMillan which recently has been given to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where Geary is the curator of African and Oceanic art. McMillan started collecting over sixty years ago when she was a student in Paris, and her collection now consists of fifteen hundred pieces mainly from Africa and the Pacific.

The special contributions of this book are two-fold: first, it presents the historical specificity of one particular collection, that is, it follows the life and choices of a single collector as she lived in Paris and then Boston and traveled through West and Central Africa and the Pacific, amply illustrating objects from her collection throughout. Predecessors in this field of inquiry, like Susan Vogel's *The Art of Collecting African Art* (1988), Raymond Corbey's *Tribal Art Traffic: A Chronicle of Taste, Trade and Desire in Colonial and Post-colonial Times* (2000), and Hermione Waterfield and J. C. H. King's *Provenance: Twelve Collectors of Ethnographic Art in England 1760-1990* (2006), focus on a series of different collectors within the framework of a general history of collecting in the West.

Secondly, *Material Journeys* goes beyond description and biographical detail to build a theoretical argument

based on the writing of Igor Kopytoff on the cultural biography of things and of Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones.[2] Kopytoff's essay looks at the cultural definition of objects at different points in their ongoing social life and how they circulate in and out of commodity status. He argues that in every society there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized, at least for a time. This process, which he calls "singularization," is at the heart of art collecting and is the basis for the prominence of art markets, dealers, and museums, the main institutions that are instrumental in moving and classifying objects. (These approaches are discussed by Geary in some detail in chapter 1 and the epilogue but underlie her analysis throughout.)

According to Pratt, contact zones are the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" in relationships of asymmetrical power and domination.[3] In Pratt's terms, these kinds of spaces can include malls, churches, and classrooms, but, as Geary demonstrates, this works as well for the trajectory of these objects as they moved from African villages to Western homes and from being labeled as curios, then as ethnographic specimens, and finally as fine art in the Western system of classification. Together these theoretical arguments underlie Geary's discussion.

The first chapter of *Material Journeys* sketches the by now fairly well-known history of collecting, focusing on the effects of colonialism, the impact of artists in Paris,

and the role museums have played in defining the field. Geary points out quite rightly that the history and patterns of collecting during the colonial period (late nineteenth to early twentieth century) are far better documented than those of the second half of the twentieth century, which is the focus of this catalogue. She uses the theoretical approaches mentioned above to discuss the role of traders, dealers, collectors, scholars, and especially museum personnel in moving objects into new classificatory spaces. In these new spaces standards of authenticity and value emerged, as did the related issue of fakery. These factors were to define the field in the second half of the twentieth century.

The second chapter, entitled "Paris to Cambridge," is historical in intent. It addresses both the general scene in Paris in the 1930s and McMillan's story. When McMillan (then Lalanne) came to Paris in 1943, interest in African and Oceanic art was well established. Starting in the 1930s there emerged a coterie of scholars, collectors, intellectuals, and dealers whose influence led to the earliest scholarly expeditions—the Mission Dakar-Djibouti and the voyage of Korrigare to the Pacific—as well as to the opening of the Musée de l'Homme in 1938.

Lalanne grew up in a small town in the Pyrenees and came to Paris in 1943 to study. There she met and married an American officer, Robert McMillan. In a brief discussion, Geary and Xatart provide some general background to Geneviève McMillan's experiences in Paris, documenting significant people whom she met (for example, Leopold Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop), especially Madeline Rousseau (1895-1980), a figure little known here but the center of an influential circle of collectors and dealers who met regularly in her salon. As Geary points out, "Given such an introduction to the aesthetics and beauty of African art, Lalanne's desire to begin collecting African as well as Oceanic art is no surprise" (p. 28). In 1946, after finishing her degree in political science and marrying McMillan, the two moved to Cambridge. There Geneviève McMillan found a much more limited art scene, but she gathered around her friends with similar interests, such as the artist Reba Stewart, and expanded her collection. To do this, McMillan traveled to Africa and New Guinea; to exhibitions elsewhere in the United States; and to see dealers in Paris, Brussels, Rome, and London.

The following chapters are organized around places that she visited. According to Geary, "In these voyages we gain a clearer picture of the forces—time, place, economic and cultural imperatives—that shaped the under-

standing of these works and their paths to the McMillan collection" (p. 35). Presumably these travels form the basis for the organization of the chapters in the main section of the book, but McMillan's exact itineraries for each locale are not spelled out and we never learn the factors influencing her specific choices while there. In fact, there is really no overall discussion about her taste and aesthetics and as a result we do not hear her "voice"—an unfortunate lack in an otherwise excellent study.

The main part of the book is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on one or more cities or regions in Africa and the Pacific: "Freetown-Monrovia-Bissau," "Bamako, Abidjan-Accra-Kumasi-Cotonou," "Lagos-Douala-Foumban," "Kinshasa-Brazzaville, Rabaul-Angoram-Solomon Islands," and, lastly, "Papua-Bali-and Beyond." Geary and Xatart highlight the colonial history and the kinds of trade networks developed in each locale. The chapters are beautifully illustrated with museum photos of the objects in McMillan's collection (including basic acquisition information); field photos by colonial officials, visitors, and scholars going back to the beginning of the twentieth century; and depictions of art on stamps and postcards.

In these chapters, Geary incorporates extensive information based on the most recent studies about the art market in each city as well as the types of objects available, their functions and meanings, and the trajectories of their appreciation in the West. There is no attempt to cover the whole range of styles in Africa generally or in the specific areas on which she concentrates. Rather the types of objects illustrated and discussed for any one region are those in the McMillan collection for which there exists extensive scholarly information. As a result, the coverage is uneven and the transitions sometimes abrupt. Nevertheless, these objects are discussed in the light of the key concepts employed: Pratt's contact zones and Kopytoff's cultural biography of things.

Each chapter focuses on one or more cities portrayed by Geary as contact zones—hubs of trade built around expatriate residents, visiting foreign art dealers, suppliers who travel around villages, and street vendors. Geary starts with a discussion of the colonial history of collecting in the city in question and explains the types of art institutions that developed there; for example, she describes Abidjan as the most important West African art market before 1999. French colonials were very interested in African art there and early on collected from groups like the Baule, with the first sculptures reaching the Musée du Trocadero before 1900. Geary uses the re-

search of Daniel J. Crowley and Christopher B. Steiner to discuss the art market in Abidjan and the studies of the Baule by Susan Mullin Vogel and Phillip Ravenhill to explore the cultural background, meanings, and uses of the pieces that McMillan purchased.[4]

The second main interest throughout the chapters is the life history of objects as they traveled a journey of Western categorization into the class of “art.” These reevaluations range from such previously ignored forms like photographs and postcards to “newly discovered” types of objects that did not belong to the early canon of African art in the West. Here, for example, Geary traces the trajectory of Kota reliquary figures from their status as ethnographic objects in French and German museums in the late nineteenth century to highly prized art forms after Parisian artists became enthusiastic about them.

In her epilogue, “Into the Twenty-first Century,” Geary points out that the inclusion of new media like photographs and postcards (an appreciation stimulated in large measure, I might add, by Geary’s own research) has been paralleled by the increasing rarity and hence cost of those very objects—primarily masks and statues—that were the earlier focus of interest. However, the notion that “real” art is vanishing is belied by the way artists in Africa and the Pacific are—and have been since earliest contact—playing with foreign ideas and creating new forms and media. Geary argues that as a result we need to rethink our treasured concepts, such as “authenticity” and “tourist art.” She correctly points out that these are based on old Western stereotypes and we need to jettison old terminology of primitive, folk, popular, tourist, and so on, and develop new forms of classification that take into account the creativity, adaptivity, and entrepreneurship of today’s artists. To do this we need to base our concepts on the realization that the forms we are considering are part of a global market.

Material Journeys is a significant addition to the growing literature on classification, collecting, and the

changing art market. By skillfully grounding their presentation of the McMillan collection in this scholarly literature, Geary and Xatart have made an important contribution to the more popular genre of the African and Oceanic art catalogue.

Notes

[1]. Geary developed the concept of the catalogue and exhibition. Xatart, a graduate of the Ecole de Louvre and then Geary’s part-time assistant who specializes in Oceania, helped with the research and was responsible for the chapters on Oceanic art (Geary, personal communication, August 19, 2008 and October 15, 2010).

[2]. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91; and Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

[3]. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4.

[4]. Daniel J. Crowley, “The Contemporary-Traditional Art Market in Africa,” *African Arts* 4, no. 1 (1970): 43-49, 80; Daniel J. Crowley, “The West African Art Market Revisited,” *African Arts* 7, no. 4 (1974): 54-59; Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christopher B. Steiner, “The Art of the Trade: On the Creation of Value and Authenticity in the African Art Market,” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 151-165; Susan Mullin Vogel, “People of Wood: Baule Figure Sculpture,” *Art Journal* 33, no. 1 (1973): 23-26; Susan Mullin Vogel, *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Phillip Ravenhill, *Dreams and Reveries: Images of Otherworld Mates among the Baule, West Africa* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

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