

# H-Net Reviews

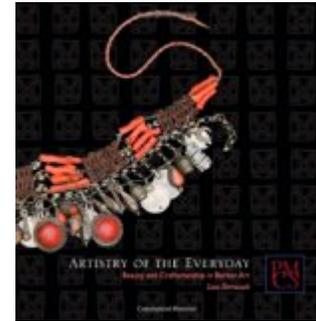
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa Bernasek. *Artistry of the Everyday: Beauty and Craftsmanship in Berber Art*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, 2008. xviii + 125 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87365-405-0.

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## Berber Arts: Collecting Contested Identities

*Artistry of the Everyday* was conceived in conjunction with the 2004 exhibition, *Imazighen! Beauty and Artisanry in Berber Life*, at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology. More than a catalog featuring color plates of the works on exhibit, the text provides a welcome addition to the growing literature on North African art and culture. Curators Susan Gilson Miller and Lisa Bernasek have selected beautiful examples of the region's artistic legacy, and provided both historical and collection context, while also introducing problematic issues in the field of North African studies in a pithy yet sensitive manner.

The book opens with the foreword "Berber Art and Identity" by Miller, director of Harvard's Moroccan Studies program. This essay provides an introduction to the complexities of Berber identity alongside a concise summary of the Berber cultural renaissance in historical context. Miller's brief foreword acknowledges the contested nature of Berber as a cultural category, noting that the exhibition was "conceived in the spirit of this ongoing debate" (p. xiii). The author's approach sets the tone of the catalog, a work that succeeds admirably in presenting complex subject matter to audiences both scholarly and general.

Bernasek's opening essay, "The Imazighen and Their Arts," uses a selection of the Peabody Museum's North African holdings as an introduction to the diverse art forms, regions, and communities that participate in the

Berber cultural complex. The author provides a short history of the Berber Maghreb, including contemporary tensions between the growing cultural movement and North African nation-states. Bernasek clearly articulates her choice of terminology, using "Berber" to "refer to phenomena that transcend specific regional identities," while utilizing a more localized vocabulary on a regional basis (p. 8). This approach is quite useful, particularly for a general audience, and finds further expression in the organization of the main text.

Each essay frames a specific Berber-speaking region, and relates acquisition records and accounts of artistic production with accompanying historical photographs from the field. "Touring Kabylia" focuses on the Kabyle region of northern Algeria and the leisure trips during which the majority of the regional pieces (primarily jewelry, pottery, and textiles) were collected. "Harvard in the Rif" discusses the collections made by anthropologist Carleton S. Coon during doctoral research in northern Morocco. The objects he acquired reflect an emphasis on daily life, including pottery, clothing, and leatherwork. Objects from the Algerian Sahara form the bulk of the Peabody collection, and constitute the emphasis of the third essay, "Collecting Tuareg Art." In addition to discussing the jewelry, leatherwork, and weaponry collected by Lloyd Cabot Briggs, this essay provides in-depth information concerning the recent changes in Tuareg life, including governmental attempts to sedentarize the nomads. Bernasek's final essay, "Amazigh Art

Today,” situates Berber cultural production within a dynamic global market, discussing the continuity of traditional arts as well as such modern painters as Farid Belkhaia, who derive inspiration from Berber design.

The remainder of the volume is devoted to twenty-five beautiful color plates. The organization of the plates is curious, as they are arranged neither by region nor genre. Brief accompanying texts explain in considerable detail provenance, production, formal qualities, and social significance. In some cases, the curators relate anecdotes

specific to the acquisition of selected art works.

*Artistry of the Everyday* constitutes a welcome addition to the growing literature on North African art. Beautiful color plates, insightful essays, and historical photographs provide readers with a nuanced introduction to the region’s visual culture. The authors’ emphasis on acquisition practices and collectors’ biographies provides another layer of depth. The volume’s accessibility will serve well those interested in collecting practice as well as those studying North African art and culture.

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