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Leonard Kahan, Donna Page, Pascal James Imperato, eds. *Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 523 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35251-4.

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Surfaces of History and Significance

Exhibits in the catalogue are about patina–the material residue of use that not only contributes to the value, meaning, and aesthetics of a work, but also signals its age and history.[1] It may indicate the frequency with which the sculpture was put to use as well as how it was handled. Although the works discussed have been taken out of their original context–through exchange, trade, or even appropriation–they carry their history and culture with them through patination. Removing that patination does as great a violence to the work as removing a reliquary guardian figure from its bundle or box of skulls, or mutilating the figure by removing its genitals (a Victorian tendency–and not restricted to African sculptures). Though the works may now be experienced in a different environment, patina remains a significant, though not totally reliable avenue through which their authenticity can be ascertained (p. 384). The essays in this volume bring together a wealth of information gathered ethnographically to reveal how important the surface of a piece is to understanding the culture that once possessed it.

In the first chapter, Leonard Kahan's historical background of African art gives a critical review of the journey of the forms and objects when they first entered Western consciousness in the nineteenth century. His analysis is in-depth, and he accesses modern taste as well as appreciation of African artifacts. He reiterates Marshall Mount's 1973 classifications in twentieth-century African art, although he calls attention to their inconsistencies. Going further, he advocates for a more nuanced analysis of the art forms. This is a clever suggestion especially as current methodologies adopted for the study of African art are quickly becoming outmoded because of new research methods. In chapter 2, "Agents of Transformation," Donna Page is able to analyze the complex process of creating surfaces through the examination of the sequence of applications as they are made by different individuals in different African cultures. Her analysis corroborates what is still observable today. For example, in Olokun earthen sculptures and worship objects, it is only when the herbs and other ritual substances necessary to activate the forms are added that it becomes active for ritual and healing purposes. The third chapter focuses on the analysis of color. Although taking its cue from Victor Turner's "forest of symbolism," color symbolism has an implicit universal acceptability when accessed from different cultural backgrounds.

As I have observed during fieldwork in Benin on Olokun sculpture, the surface quality of the sculptures and objects are not of significance except in that they echo the age and longevity of the forms. This contrasts with Pascal James Imperato's essay on Bamana sculptures, in which he concludes that "the surface of Bamana sculptures carry important cultural messages" (p. 189). Through surface treatments of color, patina, encrustation, and design, the Bamana infuse sculpture with *nyama* and maintain linkages between the living and the spirit worlds. In Benin, the qualities of surface treatment are parameters that define the concept of beauty or *imose*, but do not enhance the ritual potency of the sculptures.

In the fourth chapter, Charles Bordogna gives a vivid description of Yoruba *ibeji*, showing how the surface qualities of these figures create a sense of visual, tactile, and olfactory participation. In chapter 5, Bolaji Campbell discusses Yoruba color symbolism, arguing that the parochial triad of red, black, and white does not hold in the Yoruba context. In the sixth chapter,"Surface Conditions of Wood Sculptures," Kahan further elaborates upon the symbolism embedded in some wooden sculptures. Despite their continued existence, today many wooden sculptures have only minimal significance in the cultures that once produced and possessed them. The reason for this abandonment is linked to the ravenous ways Christianity and Islam have taken over many indigenous belief systems. Modern African cities have had

their share of growing Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Orthodox churches. There is also a steady rise in mosques within and around cities. The activities of these foreign religious groups contradict tenets of indigenous African religion as practiced in the past. Churches discourages their members from having any dealings with deity worship in general, even though some members, and even pastors, have been recorded as going to centers of worship at unsociable hours to obtain medicines and charms for good luck and success in business. Muslims have been more tolerant of the traditional religion.

The last chapter of the catalogue is a detailed compilation of substances used as agents to encrust as well as to color sculpture in Africa. The compendium is rich and Page is able to provide botanical references for all the plants associated with the various substances applied to these sculptures.

Not only are the essays in this volume comprehensive in scope and based on meticulous scholarship, but they also greatly illuminates an important feature of African sculpture, the meaning of the surface. An aspect of the book that I found significant is the methodology adopted by Kahan and Imperato. They based their analyses largely on ethnographic data gathered from the respective African cultures where the pieces originated, and consequently were able to reconstruct a valid history of the pieces. By pushing the boundaries beyond stereotypes through the incorporation of the voices of the people that owned and used these artifacts, the text has achieved another milestone in the study of African material and visual culture. I must add that, an effort such as this must act as a stimulus to other scholars to search for the salient symbolism of numerous African sculptures locked away in Western museums.

The book is well organized, has extensive references, and contains a substantive bibliography. It also has exceptional color and black and white illustrations that focus on surface rather than sculptural form. It represent a valuable contribution to the expanding literature on African art. The color plates and informative essays provide the reader with a good introduction to the deeper meanings embedded in the surfaces of the various masks and statuary from the West African cultures that produced them. The volume is particularly welcome given the lack of material published on the subject.

Note

[1]. Suzanne Blier, *Art of the Senses: African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 11.

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