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William Siegmann, Joseph Adande, Kevin D. Dumouchelle. *African Art: A Century at the Brooklyn Museum.* Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2009. 296 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7913-4321-1; $49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87273-163-9.

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The Brooklyn Museum: Pioneer in the Appreciation of African Art

The collection of African art at the Brooklyn Museum is one of the oldest and finest in the world. William Siegmann spent from 1978 to 2009 as its African art curator, and this catalogue, published just after his retirement, features more than 130 works from the collection. The catalogue includes an essay by Siegmann on the history of the collection, a statement about African art's past and present by the contemporary African museologist Joseph Adande, and photos and catalogue notes on each of the illustrated objects written by Siegmann and his successor, Kevin Dumouchelle.

Siegmann points out in his introductory essay that the Brooklyn Museum was one of the first places in the world to exhibit African objects as *art*, rather than as cultural curiosities. Stewart Culin, the museum's curator of ethnography from 1903 to 1929, began actively collecting African objects early in the 1920s, purchasing in 1922 a collection of more than 1500 objects from the Congo. This formed the core of Brooklyn's exhibition of African art organized in 1923. Culin, certainly ahead of his time, exhibited the objects as art, rather than material culture, as he makes very clear in his own catalogue notes (quoted by Siegmann): "The entire collection, whatever may have been its original uses, is shown under the classification of art, as representing a creative impulse, and not for the purposes of illustrating the customs of the African peoples" (p. 13). Culin further criticized the displays of African objects at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Washington for their concentration on ethnographic identification rather than artistic merit. His exhibition, which was very well received, had its greatest impact in two places: Harlem, where a young African American community of artists was creating the Harlem Renaissance; and the world of fashion and textiles, the designs of 1923 reflecting the influence of Kuba raffia cloth, in particular. Culin also organized the permanent display of non-Western arts into color-coded, brightly painted galleries, partly inspired by commercial displays at John Wanamaker's department store in Philadelphia. Siegmann also notes that the exhibition in Brooklyn was the only permanent installation of African art in New York before 1957.

After Culin's death in 1929, the African collection came under the control of Herbert Spinden, curator from 1929-50, whose scholarship focused on Mayan archaeology. During Spinden's tenure, a few very fine works came into the collection, most notably a middle-period Benin royal commemorative head. The collection also grew through acquisition of material culture collected by three women who traveled in Africa early in the twentieth century: Delia Ashley, Margaret Carson Hubbard, and Mrs. Herman Eggars. Their collections included beaded objects, weapons, and objects of daily use, not at all common in American art museum collections before the 1980s.

In 1950, Frederick R. Pleasants replaced Spinden as the curator of non-Western art. Brooklyn's collection of African art once again grew actively through his efforts, with his solicitation of gifts and purchases from famous collectors: Helena Rubenstein, Vincent Price, and Millicent Rogers among them. In 1954, the collection had grown in size and quality to the point that Pleasants organized the traveling exhibition Masterpieces of African Art, which paired objects from Brooklyn's permanent collection with pieces borrowed from well-known European and American private collections. Following this exhibition, many of the loaned works actually came to Brooklyn. Heading the department from 1957 to 1965, Jane Powell Rosenthal acquired Brooklyn's now famous eighteenth-century Kuba *Ndop*, the only such piece in the United States. She also managed the addition of a conservation laboratory to the museum, a major development.

From 1968 to 1976, Michael Kan served as curator and returned the department's focus to African art. Kan also oversaw a reorientation of Brooklyn's exhibition style to reflect the new scholarly emphasis on contextualism, presenting fine examples of African art within their original geographical and cultural context. His exhibition of Lester Wunderman's collection of Dogon art from West Africa was an early example of this. Beginning as Kan's assistant in 1971 and continuing as curator from 1976 to 1983, Sylvia Williams continued to focus on connoisseurship, but she also worked to develop the collection and exhibitions in new directions, with exhibitions of contemporary South African textiles and prints by Black artists, and the exhibition called Islam in Africa (1985), co-curated with Brooklyn's curator of Islamic art.

Siegmann came to Brooklyn in 1987 and remained there until his retirement last year. The African collection grew under his curatorship through major gifts from the estates of Adolph Gottlieb and Beatrice Riese, as well as through purchases. The focus of the collection continued to expand, to include objects of daily use (particularly after Roy Sieber's African Furniture and Household Objects went to Brooklyn in the early 1980s), textiles, ceramics, and contemporary African art. During his tenure as curator, the collection grew by more than 1600 objects, and now numbers more than 6,000 pieces. It has been reinstalled twice since 1987, and will again be reinstalled after a major architectural renovation project is finished at the museum in the coming years. Each reinstallation has reflected current trends in scholarship, as the direction of the Brooklyn Museum has sought to focus its exhibitions and collections on the community it serves. Though some scholars have criticized the recent departure from connoisseurship and modernist gallery presentation (pp. 25-27), reaction of visitors from the surrounding community has been uniformly positive. The addition of photo murals, video loops, and sound to the exhibition space has significantly enlivened the galleries and reflects the current trend in museum display and its focus on community outreach.

Siegmann's historical essay is followed by Adande's inspirational essay titled "African Art: A Transformation Process." His essay begins by mentioning the enormous size of Africa, the variety and number of its languages and social groups, its ecological variety, and the coexistence in Africa of modernity and urbanism with traditional cultural values and village life. He contends correctly that the "overlapping realities" of African existence must be considered in any presentation of the arts of the continent (p. 29). His essay touches on African shrine arts, African performance, and stresses both community and communal values, as well as African concepts of beauty and power and the importance of music, rhythm, and dance. Adande's essay also includes two examples of African textile art (interestingly, neither from Brooklyn's collection), and two contemporary works: one by Magdalene Odundo, an African British ceramic artist, and the other by the African American artist Michael Richards.

The catalogue that follows the two introductory essays includes brief statements on the traditional regions of African art scholarship, and individual essays on 130 objects from the Brooklyn collection. Each object is illustrated with a handsome phtotograph, and many of the catalogue entries include contextual images that help readers understand the traditional meanings and presentation of objects. However, this part of the book includes only one textile, an early Fon (Republic of Benin) court costume. None of the textiles acquired by Culin in 1922 are included, which seems curious since these are discussed at some length in the historical essay. Nor is there much evidence here of Brooklyn's rich collection of beaded objects, weapons, ceramics, and objects of daily use. The presentation of the collection under the traditional rubrics of style regions is understandable, but the rich variety of the collection would have been better served by a more balanced presentation. The complete picture of Africa's expressive material culture must include more than the masterpieces of wood and metal sculpture.

Nonetheless, the catalogue provides readers with a thorough and well-written essay on the history of the Brooklyn collection, a well-written discussion by an African scholar of the richness and complexity of African art and its history, and a handsome catalogue of 130 of Brooklyn's best wood and metal pieces. As such, it is a welcome addition to the scholarship on American museum collections of African art.

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