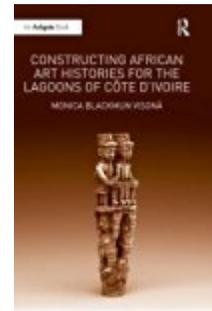


Monica Blackmun Visonà. *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte D'ivoire*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. 200 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4094-0440-8.

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The Fruits of Old-Fashioned Fieldwork: Making Sense of Lagunaire Arts

Monica Blackmun Visonà's book on the arts of the lagunaire region, *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte D'Ivoire*, showcases the author's unusual strength of understanding, summarizing, and (where appropriate) insightfully critiquing the research of her colleagues. This quality, which gives the book intellectual breadth, is abetted by the clarity of her prose. Together, these factors make her work highly accessible not only to specialists but also, potentially, to undergraduate students in the field of art history.

Visonà belongs to the generation of Africanist scholars who began their careers with substantial fieldwork. Due to financial constraints, sometimes dicey political situations, and the appeal of (infinitely easier) archival/museum dissertations, the kind of fieldwork that we did in the 1970s and 1980s, living among the subjects of our study—remote from telephone and electricity—is no longer common practice. Visonà's work, however, shows a sensitivity to local lagunaire culture that can only come from the experience of long-term fieldwork. This is an important strength undergirding her scholarship.

Solidly grounded in fieldwork, this monograph provides the first comprehensive study of the arts of the lagoon region. The bibliographical references to secondary sources are comprehensive, and the use of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary archival records is also impressive. The history of this region cannot be written with significant chronological depth, given the relatively late (mid-nineteenth-century) arrival

of European observers. One does wonder whether a careful study of oral traditions might have yielded a somewhat greater chronological depth, particularly if the author spoke at least one of the dozen distinct languages of the lagoon region. A few more primary documents might have been ferreted out of European collections as well. For example, I believe that a visit to the collections of the Société de Géographie in Paris might uncover some original materials from the explorer Parfait-Louis Monteil (1898).

I was particularly impressed by Visonà's discovery of the significant role played by women in age-grade initiation ceremonies. This is part of her careful coverage of the role of gender in lagoon arts. As she demonstrates, female authority plays a significant role underlying male action in an ostensibly male domain. This is a fundamental discovery. Her understanding of local concepts of time as a sort of braided rope is also masterful and praiseworthy. Likewise, I applaud her observation that local lagunaire peoples have distinct epistemological categories (sacred or not) that differ from Western categories (shape, form). I would also single out for praise the author's coverage of other media besides wood, including the ivory carvings surrounded by oval faces that served as pommels. These ivories suggest, as she rightly hypothesizes, nineteenth-century, or even earlier, prototypes.

I have only one criticism: for the earliest travel accounts, such as Jean/John Barbot's early eighteenth-century travel narrative, which was published in English

in 1730, she should have gone to the original source, rather than simply referring to secondary citations. A fine annotated version exists (*Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712* [1992], edited by P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law).

To my mind, next to her rich field data, the crowning jewel of this book is the manner in which she incorporates herself into the discussion of methodology. And this strength is further heightened by her trenchant and concise critique of poststructuralist/postcolonial theory. As she writes: “I was dismayed by [Michel] Foucault’s underlying assertion that truth is mutable and by [Jean] Baudrillard’s challenges to the notion of reality itself. If I had espoused these basic tenets of post-structuralism, why should I have traveled to Africa to gather ‘truths’ about Lagoon arts from artists and patrons?” (p. 128). To which I say: Bravo!

Her critique of decontextualized, postcolonial theory

as (mis)applied to lagunaire arts, which she knows in context, is also to be applauded. And finally, her knowledge from the field enables her to deconstruct and dismiss a misguided attempt by one contemporary museum curator to argue that a particular sculpture spoke to “the rising empowerment of Ivoirien women” (p. 176). In fact, it spoke more to the desires of certain wealthy men to possess erotic sculpture. As she says, in a worthy epitaph for such poststructuralist interpretations, “this assessment would be considered ludicrous by the men who commission sculptural groups from the artist” (p. 176).

In sum, for its clear writing style and its comprehensive treatment, based on extensive fieldwork and many years of experience, of the wide range of lagunaire art forms, and its succinct articulation of the various methodologies engaged by other scholars who have dealt with the arts of West Africa, Visonà’s monograph is to be strongly recommended.

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