

**Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, Alexander Ives Bortolot, eds..** *Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. 239 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-9893718-1-0.

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*Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone* was produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to accompany an exhibition that will travel to four American museums. All of the works in the exhibition and illustrated in the catalogue were collected by Bill Siegmann during his many years of research and travel in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Siegmann was director of the Africana Museum at Cuttington University in Liberia, the National Museum of Liberia, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The title of the exhibition was selected because Liberia and Sierra Leone are part of a tropical rainforest that runs along the West African coast from Guinea to Nigeria. In support of this title, the general editors declare, “the forest provides the physical and conceptual terrain where actions and ideas are developed and pursued” (p. 8). Early fifteenth-century contact with Europe, immigration of emancipated slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a more recent history of civil war have also given a particular distinction to the region.

The catalogue is divided into five sections, the three most significant being a remembrance of Bill Siegmann, a collection of essays on the arts of the region, and a catalogue of objects in the exhibition itself. Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, curator of African Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts,

organized and introduces the section entitled “Remembering Bill Siegmann” (who died in 2011). It consists of statements by Siegmann himself and eight of his colleagues and friends that reveal not only Bill’s achievements and interests but also his personal and professional qualities. His commitment to understanding, preserving, and sharing the material culture of Liberia rather than focus on a particular area or ethnic group is evident in these accounts, as is his sincere interest in people as individuals and his willingness to help both colleagues and Liberians whenever possible. The section also features thirteen informal photographs.

The book’s largest and most informative section, “Visions from the Forests,” consists of seven essays by scholars with distinctive research interests. The first essay, “Forests in the Imagination of the Upper Guinea Coast” by Mariane C. Ferme (anthropologist) and Paul Richards (agriculturist), focuses on the forest itself—its history and impact on the cultures of the area as well as the connection between forest materials and gender. The link between the forest and the male-controlled Poro Society, the historical and social role of hunting, as well as distinctive attitudes about the bush in contrast to farm and village are briefly discussed. Ferme and Richards examine raw materials from

the forest in relation to gender roles, especially as they relate to male and female initiation societies, Poro and Sande respectively. The materials that constitute masquerades—especially wood, raffia, cotton cloth, and various trade items—are considered, but their connection to gender is not always clearly presented. This is especially true of the last two paragraphs of the section.

The second essay in this section, “Extending the Stage: Photography and Sande Initiates in the Early Twentieth Century,” by Nanina Guyer (Africanist), is a well-written and fascinating study of photographs of Sande initiates done by early twentieth-century professional photographers. These images were taken within the village but not within the Sande enclosure as that would have been forbidden. Guyer discusses them within the broader tradition of photographic portraiture in Sierra Leone, emphasizing the work of Alphonso Lisk-Carew, a Freetown-born photographer. Information on the context of the photographs is provided by quotes from Thomas Alldridge, a colonial administrator who traveled extensively in Sierra Leone during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Guyer also explores such nonethnographic uses for the photographs as picture postcards from the early twentieth century, with their outrageously out-of-context captions.

The most thought-provoking essay, “By Their Fruits You Will Know Them: Sande Mask Carvers Identified,” is by art historian Frederick Lamp. His essay begins with basic information on the use, origin, meaning, and general characteristics of the Sande mask. Lamp next states that after forty years of collecting images, he has been able to identify ninety-four workshops or styles for Sande masks. Lamp then connects masks illustrated in the catalogue to eight workshops, examining the masks’ formal characteristics, ethnic origin, and estimated number of known examples. He illustrates his essay with documentary photographs and images of similar works in other collections.

He concludes with a consideration of male non-Sande helmet masks based on one particular example in the exhibition (catalogue #21), noting the features that differentiate this particular mask from Sande masks and other types of male helmet masks.

The third essay, “Spirits from the Forest: Dan Masks in Performance and Everyday Life” by Daniel B. Reed (folklorist and ethnomusicologist), focuses on the formal features and significance of Dan spirit masks (*ge/gle*). Of particular interest are his research entries from 1997 documenting specific mask appearances. However, Reed’s discussion of particular masks and their specific uses only partially addresses the complexity of the connections between form and function for Dan masking. Nonetheless, the overall social, religious, and performance contexts of Dan masking is well articulated.

“Brass Casting in Liberia,” a short and well-written essay by Barbara Johnson (art historian), surveys a range of brass objects and their production as well as the careers of two brass casters. The penultimate essay by Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, “Ritual Recycling: Modern Uses of Ancient Stone Sculptures in the Upper Guinea Forest Region,” examines the tradition of stone sculpture in the area, especially those in the styles referred to as *nomoli* and *pomdo*. Grootaers also discusses related ivory carving and wood sculpture, notably a wooden male figure in the Baltimore Museum of Art dating from 1200 to 1400 CE. He briefly presents the historical context and early accounts of these sculptural traditions prior to discussing in more detail their later re-use or recycling. In addition, the art works are considered within the wider context of stones believed to have supernatural powers.

The final essay in this section, “William Siegmann, Advocate for Connoisseurship” by Christine Mullen Kreamer (art historian), is a remembrance that stresses Siegmann’s love of objects. It is also a defense of connoisseurship, which in-

volves a connection with, and an understanding of, the individual work of art and its quality. Kraemer notes that Roy Sieber of Indiana University taught his students that the object was “the starting and ending point for art-historical enquiry” (p. 122). She stresses that Siegmann was guided by this approach throughout his career.

The actual catalogue of objects is divided into eleven sections, each focusing on a different object type: Sande society masks, Mende female figures, Sande society pendants and necklaces, men’s society masks (Poro and Thoma in particular), masks of the Dan, Mano, Kono, and Bassa peoples, miniature masks, game boards, Liberian brass (with a full page featuring a Grebo or Kru ring with knobs), stone sculpture of the Sapi and Kissi peoples, textiles, and prestige arts of the Mende Vai, Kim, and Teme peoples. Each section has a one-page introduction written by the two general editors, except for “Textiles” and “Brass from Liberia,” which were authored by Natasha Thoreson, a PhD student at the University of Minnesota School of Design. Although a few of the introductions repeat information from the more extensive essays in “Visions From the Forests,” most expand upon the earlier material or interpret it differently. The book concludes with an appendix in which Lamp discusses the term *nowo* as a name for the Sande mask. The appendix is followed by an extensive bibliography, information about the authors, an index, and finally, credits.

*Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone* is a well-organized and clearly written publication that succeeds in highlighting the life and work of Bill Siegmann, especially his commitment to the arts and peoples of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and serving as a catalogue for the diverse range of objects collected by Siegmann and shown in the exhibition. My most serious criticism is reserved for the book’s introduction, which is far too short and general given the range and complexity of the art works on exhibit. It consists of generalizations about the forest, a very

brief overview of Liberian and Sierra Leonean history, and some references to recent attempts to preserve the history and material culture of the region. There is also what seems to me to be unnecessary repetition between the essays and the introductions to specific objects. I also found the use of tiny, thumbnail-sized photographs in the top margin, when objects were being discussed or mentioned in the essay section, problematic. They are far too small to see any detail and therefore more annoying than helpful.

In general, however, the catalogue is a valuable and useful resource for anyone interested in the visual culture of Liberia and Sierra Leone. The essays cover a variety of topics related to the art and cultures of the region. High-quality photographs, illustrating the exhibited objects, contribute significantly to the book’s visual impact. Documentary images dating from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century add a broader historical dimension. Finally, it highlights the personal and professional contributions of Bill Siegmann to the field of African art, making it a fitting tribute.

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