

Peter Stepan. *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks*. New York: Prestel Publishing, 2005. 185 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7913-3228-4.

Reviewed by Herbert Cole

Published on H-AfrArts (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti



Celebrating African Masks: A Comprehensive Overview?

This large-format volume is aptly subtitled, as it really does celebrate 126 masks, mostly of wood as we might expect but including a few of metal and fiber, some of the latter including bead and shell appliqué. It is a handsome, hefty book with splendid photographs of masks shot in a studio setting. There are also occasional quite dramatic close-up details, one, for example, revealing the textured surface and cracks of the British Museum's Benin ivory pendant mask. Since the book is substantially about photographs—there is at least one large picture of every mask and another thumbnail in the catalogue at the back of the book—I would have preferred some secondary shots from different vantage points to better reveal the full three dimensionality of several very sculptural examples. Still, it is hard to quibble with the pictures even though as an avowed contextualist, I would have asked for more than the six field photos of masks in action at the front of the book. Also, only a few of the field shots elucidate the masks otherwise celebrated here.

The text, while informative and for the most part accurate, begs a lot of questions. It begins with a short preface that promises “a comprehensive overview of the finest African masks” (p. 19). “Comprehensive overview” I find a bit contradictory and perhaps too ambitious even so, and “the finest” is surely arguable, though unquestionably there are very many oft-published and thus familiar “old saws” here that appear in many other books—the “Mona Lisas,” as the author states (p. 19). A large number, for example, come from the Barbier-Mueller collection. The choice of masks is clearly aesthetic, al-

though they are “supplemented by an outline of the broad range of key mask types” (p. 19)—again an ambitious and I think unfulfilled claim. Let me argue a bit too with the mask choices: only two Dogon masks, yet nine from the Bamana, five of those *chi wara* variants. There are three male Songye *kifwebe* masks, two Lubas, and four each Ejagham, Chokwe, and Makonde but no Egungun, Salampasu, Lwalwa, Toma, Landuma, Duala, Igala, or Idoma. And for me the Bira/Lese, Ndaka/Beke, Kwere, Lungu, Diola, Ngongo, and Mossi masks are neither canonical nor of the very highest artistic standard. Such judgments, of course, are more than a bit tinged with subjectivity.

The text, “Spirits Speak,” is a mere ten pages long, and for a subject as vast and complex as African masks, both comprehensiveness and a discussion of key mask types seem unlikely. “Overview” is the right descriptor for this text, which makes many good points but is surely not a systematic analysis. The text begins on a few odd notes, negative assessments of Andre Breton's Surrealist ideas and those of Carl Einstein in his 1915 book. Why begin a “celebration” with criticisms of this sort? Four times the translator uses the word “plastic” (pp. 21, 22) for what should be “sculptural.” “Bibliolatry,” “biotope,” and “multifarity” (all on p. 23) are three other words that strike me as not quite accurate in English. Mr. Stepan extols the contextual view of masks but in this text does not practice very fully what he preaches. Yet he does correctly say that process is the “content” of many current studies, and he praises Fred Lamp's efforts in examining

varied contextual dimensions of African art in his recent book, *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum* (2004). And he dredges up from an unattributed somewhere the quotation “I am not Myself” to describe the “urgency of each dancer’s performance” among other things (p. 22). He also properly sees a balance among cult and play, sacred and profane. His brief case studies (Bidjogo, Dan, Bamana, Cameroon [Kom], and Chokwe) are valuable but unfortunately do not relate to the book’s illustrations, either the context or museum shots. Stepan tells us that a Bamana Komo mask “resembles” an altar (p. 28) but fails to see that it is an altar. And I am at a loss when he compares African masking to “family constellation therapy” (p. 30). Toward the end of his essay he returns to Breton, this time in praise: “the immobile mask” within an “ephemeral, diaphanous” web (p. 30)—a metaphor about simultaneous

tranquility and action that I find hard to follow, or maybe I simply do not agree with it. Overall, though, the essay is quite thoughtful and sometime thought-provoking. I enjoyed reading it even if I have several minor quibbles.

The catalogue, a series of 126 mini-essays by Iris Hahner, is a useful and well-researched compendium of information about each mask, its symbolism, use, meaning, and function, and it includes provenance for many examples. The book concludes with a bibliography of approximately 235 entries. A twice-folded map is included as an insert, locating most of the masks in their approximate geographic positions.

Prestel, the publisher, has contributed a great deal to the illustration, study, and elucidation of African art, and deserves commendation for its efforts. We may hope that they will continue to publish good books on the subject.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

Citation: Herbert Cole. Review of Stepan, Peter, *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23023>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.