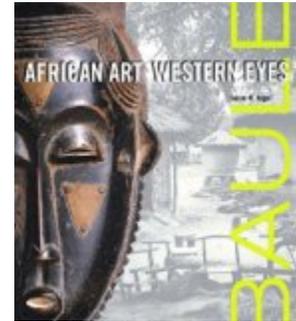


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Mullin Vogel. *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997. 312 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89467-078-7; \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07317-1.

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This book, and the exhibit which it accompanies, were a long time in the making, and the wait was worth it. *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes* presents its readers with the most complete picture of the Baule and their material culture yet published. Richly illustrated and documented, this book takes us through analyses of Baule art from the author's point of view and attempts through quotation and paraphrasing of many statements by Baule individuals to introduce its readers to the fact that the Baule, while they create many beautiful objects and encounter them regularly in their lives, don't think of them or look at them the same way we do in the West. In fact, the second part of Vogel's book is organized according to the different ways of "seeing" in Baule terms as she has learned from long study working in towns and villages in central Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). Beginning with an introduction to the Baule and her involvement with them, she divides her text into eight chapters in two divisions. The first four chapters discuss the Western approach to Baule art, the Baule world, art in the Baule world, and Baule attitudes toward art and looking at it. The last four chapters approach Baule art from the point of view of visibility and seeing: prolonged looking (watching of performance arts), avoidance of looking (sacred arts), glimpsing (private or personal arts), and everyday availability (profane or everyday arts).

The book takes its readers on a retrospective trip through Vogel's research and publications of the past twenty-five years, and in a way it reflects the state of the scholarship in African Art during the same period. Vogel begins the Introduction with a disclaimer: "This book is not the book I expected to write." She originally intended to write a museum catalogue, in which the objects would be discussed as "art." This is impossible in Baule terms,

because the term "art" is not in the Baule lexicon (there is nothing particularly new in this: the word is not included in many African languages). However, the Baule do admit to the presence of beautiful objects in their lives, objects which are special because of their power to affect lives in various ways.

Chapter One, titled "Baule Art: The View from the West," discusses form and style in Baule art, much as the better formalist essays in catalogues of the sixties did. In this chapter, she also presents the Baule legend of their origins among the Ghanaian Akan and their migration to their current territory led by Queen Pokou, who sacrificed her son so they could cross a river and escape their enemies. At the same time, Vogel introduces the Mamla, still recognized among the Baule today as their ancestors who "came out of the ground" in central Cote d'Ivoire. According to Vogel, the Mamla deserve credit for originating most of the forms in Baule art, while the style of refined, intricately decorated surfaces comes from the metal arts brought by other Baule (by implication, the eighteenth-century migrants) from the east.

Chapter Two, "The Baule World," reads like a discussion by a structuralist/functionalist ethnographer or art historian of the 70s. Here she presents the moieties of male/female and village/wilderness (and village animals/forest animals, village plants/forest plants), but also discusses the "fuzzy" areas between the two: masquerade performances that blur the distinction between male and female, the zone of transition between human space (the village) and nature space (the forest) that is clearly present in Baule settlements. She also discusses human/spirit relationships here: the powerful influences of spirits in the Baule universe, and the people (*komien*)

who are able to negotiate communications between the human (physical) world and the world of spirits. The discussion is thorough and sympathetic, and peppered with quotes from interviews in which the Baule themselves articulate these ideas. Among the devices for regulating relationships between the human and spirit worlds (and thus of controlling spirit forces, which are dangerously unpredictable) are the sculptures which Westerners classify as “art.”

In Chapter Three, “Art and the Baule,” Vogel approaches the difficult question of meaning: if they don’t think of these objects the same way we do, then how do the Baule consider them? Here, she introduces the notion of art objects (here read “sculptures”) as “resonant” objects which are important in other ways than for their beauty. They are physical manifestations of spirit powers which are very real and intensely felt by the Baule. As Vogel puts it, art does not exist for the Baule, it qualifies existence. She discusses the different terms the Baule use when referring to “looking,” “seeing,” or “watching” objects. Finally in this chapter, she discusses the ownership of objects. Almost all Baule art is owned by individuals, and thus considered personal property. The exception is the gold, cloth and stools that are part of family ancestral shrines. Her discussion and illustration of portrait masks made for women is particularly striking and helpful.

In Chapter Four, “Art, Darkness and Visual Memory,” Vogel moves away from structuralist and functionalist discussions, towards an approach based on her recent interviews regarding meanings of art according to the Baule. Her attitude shifts from a positivistic search for meaning according to Western notions, to a reflexive search for meanings in which she is aware that her meanings are not necessarily those of her informants, nor are the conclusions to be drawn from her inquiry necessarily sure. She begins to rely, as she has in recent research trips, much more on interviews and direct statements by the Baule. In this chapter, the power of objects and of sight are discussed. Through quotations from interviews, Vogel introduces the concept that looking too hard or too long at someone or something is often interpreted as malevolent, and thus potentially dangerous. The variable visibility of art objects reflects their power or importance: no art objects are kept on public display, but some are much more visible than others. Masks for public performances in the village are seen and remembered; figures of spirit spouses or diviner’s sculptures are much more private. Men’s masks are seen only by men, and then rarely. To quote from her introduction, “The more important a Baule sculpture is, the less it is displayed...

The normal state of important sculpture is to be covered from view, kept in shuttered or windowless rooms that few people enter” (p. 108). When it is visible, art is often in near-dark conditions (in a darkened room, displayed outdoors toward the end of the day). Thus, its visibility is reduced. Vogel also discusses the relationship between art and visual memory: she found that people could remember in great detail specific objects which they had only seen briefly. Here it becomes apparent that beauty in art is important to the Baule, in spite of their reticence to study or discuss it in detail.

Chapters Five through Eight continue the reflexive approach introduced in Chapter Four. They present different categories of Baule art, organized according to degrees of visibility: public performance art (*Mblo* and *Goli* masquerades) in Chapter Five; art that is “seen without looking,” or sacred art for family shrines, men’s masquerades, the women’s special dance and equipment belonging to trance diviners in Chapter Six; private art (“art that is glimpsed”) in Chapter Seven; and art that is visible in everyday life (“Art That is Visible to All: The Profane”) in Chapter Eight. Much of the art described here was first discussed in Vogel’s dissertation (1977: New York University) and subsequent publications, but the discussions are here extended, updated and richly illustrated. The discussions of *Mblo* and *Goli* masquerade performances in Chapter Five present extended analyses of the morphology of performance and costume, but also include information on variations and changes in these performances which are apparent since the first recorded examples early in the century to recent developments and innovations. Her discussion of *Goli*, which was purchased from the neighboring Wan about a century ago, is particularly thorough, and the chapter is richly illustrated with examples of mask types and masks in performance situations, most made by Vogel during visits to the field. In Chapter Six: “Art that is Seen Without Looking: The Sacred,” Vogel discusses the most powerful spiritual objects belonging to the Baule: men’s masks, which are reputed to kill women who see them, the gold and gold-plated objects that make up the core of family commemorative shrines, and figures representing powerful spirits of the wilderness. Her discussion includes definitions of terms describing the objects, such as the men’s masks—*bo nun amuin*—and monkey figures—*mbra*—and extended commentary on the restrictions and dangers that these objects can present to those who are forbidden to see them. She also discusses the sacred women’s dance, *adjanun*, here, comparing its function and the morphology of its performance to those of the men’s masks. An anecdote regard-

ing the destruction of the women's shrine by masquerading men in *Kami* and its aftermath (pp. 217- 18) illustrates the complexity and subtlety of relationships between Baule men and women. Among the largest and most impressive figure sculptures made by the Baule are those which are commissioned by trance diviners for their shrines. These figures appear briefly during public divinations, when they are assembled before the public and unveiled as the divination progresses. They can represent different types of bush spirits: Mbira, most often represented by a simian form, or Asie Usu, often quite similar in appearance to other figures of humans. Vogel's discussions of these figures and their uses are rich in detail, and her illustrations of objects and objects in context were very well chosen. Also illustrated and discussed in this chapter are the decorated hats, carved gong beaters, and other paraphernalia used by trance diviners. Figures representing spirit spouses or lovers^[1] and figures made for hunters are the subject of Chapter Seven, "Art That is Glimpsed: The Private." These have been described eloquently by Vogel and Philip Ravenhill in numerous publications. This volume contributes many descriptions from recorded interviews about the function and treatment of figures made to represent *blolo bian*, *blolo bla* and *bo usu*, and numerous poignant photographs of men and women holding and caring for their spirit spouses. For the Baule, these figures who come to their human partners in dreams are as real as life itself. Vogel's text quotes and photographs make this very apparent.

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to art that is visible in everyday life: "The Profane." Divination vessels for mouse oracles (*gbekle*), weaver's paraphernalia, carved stools and chairs, drums, spoons, miniature bronze objects for measuring and storing gold, decorated pottery, combs, slingshots, doors, and shutters all fall into this category. None of these objects, which are never hidden from view in Baule villages, have any deep spiritual significance or meaning for their owners. They do reflect a love of decorated existence that is also apparent in the great stress the Baule place on proper comportment, personal presentation, and personal cleanliness in

everyday life. One could have wished for more discussion of ceramic arts and fiber arts in this section. These are practically undiscussed in the text though they are everywhere in the photographs taken in villages. However, this is a small quibble with a book that is such a mine of valuable information on the Baule and their expressive material culture.

In her conclusion, Vogel returns to the concept of art as a modifier of African life, rather than a simple entity. Citing Herbert Cole's "Art as a Verb in Iboland," she states that the Baule, like the Igbo, appear to feel that the process of art is more important than the product (p. 292). Faced with the extraordinary collection of beautiful objects illustrated in this book, however, this reviewer can't help feeling that the product, in some as-yet unspecified way, is also very important to the Baule. As she did with previous writings like *Art/Artifact*, *African Aesthetics*, and *Exhibitionism*, Susan Vogel breaks new ground with this work on the Baule and their art. She is to be saluted for the duration of her commitment to studying the Baule, and for what is obviously her sympathetic understanding of their ways. The scholarship in this book is both retrospective and innovative at the same time. The work is remarkable for the readability of its text, for the superb quality and great number of its illustrations and the ways in which they complement the text, and for its appendices: the footnotes, glossary, bibliography and index all help make it more useful than a simple exhibition catalogue would have been. It is by far the most complete source on the Baule published to date in any language. It is not a complete ethnography, nor is it a complete discussion of Baule expressive culture, but it is closer to both than anything else available. It is a great pleasure to peruse and read. It is handsomely designed and reasonably priced. Few publications have so much to recommend them.

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