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Reviewed Work(s):

*African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire* by Enid Schildkrout; Curtis A. Keim

*African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire. [Catalog]* by Enid Schildkrout; Curtis A. Keim

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## Museum Exhibit and Photographic Book Reviews

**African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire.** *Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim*, curators. An exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, June 8, 1990–January 6, 1991. At the National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, March 5, 1991–January 12, 1992. For future tour dates and further information, contact Rose Wadsworth, American Museum of Natural History (212/769-5458).

**African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire.** *Enid Schildkrout, Curtis A. Keim*, and contributors. Seattle and New York: University of Washington Press and the American Museum of Natural History, 1990. 272 pp. n.p. (cloth).

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New York City has been the happy scene for major Africa-related exhibitions in the past few years. In addition to the Rockefeller wing of the Metropolitan Museum and the permanent installation of the American Museum of Natural History, exhibitions at the Center for African Art have challenged received wisdom about how we know and experience “exotic” cultures and artifacts. In *Perspectives on African Art* (1987–88) and *Art-Artifact* (1988), the Center questioned the authoritative claims exhibitions normally make about authenticity and aesthetics by demonstrating how the same objects can be used in different exhibition settings to tell multiple stories. *Perspectives* examined African art from the point of view of ten “co-curators,” each of whom selected and justified a set of objects from a common pool. *Art-Artifact* reproduced exhibition settings from different genres of museums, including a cabinet of curiosities, an art museum, a natural history museum, and an art gallery. Its purpose was self-reflective, to show how exhibitions produce their effects and guide their viewers to interpret cultures and objects through the frame set by the exhibiting institution. While the Center did not go so far as to claim that objects are mute, it did demonstrate the significance of the exhibit maker’s agency in telling objects’ stories.

*Art-Artifact* has been received as one of the most successful exhibitions of non-Western materials the United States has seen. Ac-

tually, it was more an exhibit of the history of exhibiting non-Western objects than of the artifacts themselves. It questioned effectively the exhibit’s claim to authority without making its objects and their multiple contexts uninteresting or unworthy of attention. One goal of the Center’s exhibits has been to criticize how the exhibition of objects in Western settings, such as art museums and galleries, has assimilated non-Western objects to a story about progress in the arts that culminates in modernism. As a result, the aesthetic products of non-Western cultures are usually defined as a minor contribution to the evolving story of Western achievements.

*African Reflections*, prepared by Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, shares the Center for African Art’s goal of getting audiences to work through their preconceived categories and helping them understand the culturally based history and sensibility out of which different artistic achievements were fashioned. These exhibits strive to command respect for diversity, and the audiences for *African Reflections* as well as *Perspectives* and *Art-Artifact* should leave these exhibits feeling that African objects and artisans were far more interesting than they otherwise appeared in exhibits that defined them in terms of “universal” (that is, ethnocentric, urban, elite, or modernist) aesthetics. Museum-goers are confronted with the possibility that their own assumptions and interpretive procedures were neither secure nor natural. In these exhibits, ideas about “art,” “Africa,” “tribes”—even “objects”—become legitimate subjects for interrogation.

New York City’s state-of-the-art exhibitions of African and ethnographic art seem to have left natural history and ethnographic museums far behind. Ironically, exhibits of the artifacts of non-Western cultures fell into disfavor just as the Third World achieved independence. The beginnings of the postcolonial era produced an inward-turning First World public culture whose interest in the Third World was confined to its production of exotic objects, trophies of travel, or lesser precursors to “contemporary” art. Ethnography and context simply did not count. If we cared at all about the arts of Africa and the Pacific, it was because they were “art,” and not because their producers had any cultural background worth displaying. Museums whose mission re-

quired some fidelity to context, such as ethnographic museums, were left to amuse children with dusty exhibits. Yet ethnographic museums have potential to tell us a great deal about other cultures and ourselves at the same time.

*African Reflections* at the American Museum of Natural History is a significant and timely illustration of how to turn this possibility into reality. By building on recent exhibitions that attempt more open-textured interpretations, it transcends the self-critical exhibit by telling a complex story about an important cultural achievement that emerged from a colonial situation. The display of "traditional" art actually made for commercial and political reasons challenges received wisdom and accumulated nonsense about "primitive art," while both the display and its catalog make important contributions to culture history and the history of African arts.

*African Reflections* tells the story of art produced among the "Mangbetu" of northeastern Zaire, a multiethnic polity that emerged out of the forest-savanna borderland of what is now Zaire and the Sudan. Competing with the Azande for power and trade, Mangbetu chiefdoms captured the imagination of early travelers and explorers such as Georg Schweinfurth, the first European explorer through these chiefdoms. When two naturalists from the American Museum of Natural History arrived to record and collect in 1909, the Mangbetu kingdom existed only in memory.

Herbert Lang and James Chapin spent over six years trekking over what was to become northeastern Zaire. Between 1909 and 1915, they were to hire over 30,000 porters and collect literally tons of material. Lang and Chapin were inspired by the "discovery" of the okapi (a forest-dwelling, giraffe-like animal). Although their expedition was primarily biological in orientation, they meticulously recorded local conditions at the same time as they collected Mangbetu material culture. Lang's photographs and Chapin's drawings are a singular and special record of a transitional period. The objects made by Mangbetu, Azande, and other artisans are remarkable for their skill and variety. Taken together, the materials represent what may be a unique cultural repository.

*African Reflections* does more than portray the societies of northeastern Zaire at the beginning of the colonial period. It is that rare creature—an exhibit accompanied by an analysis. Its combination of culture history with cultural criticism brings off a visual display that makes interpretive conclusions.

The title, "African Reflections," ironically communicates the story the exhibit wishes to tell. Enshrined within the canon of Western categories defining African cultural products are objects called "Mangbetu Art." These objects are the supposed product of a precolonial entity, the "Mangbetu Kingdom." The Mangbetu kingdom was ruled by King Mbunza, whose elaborate court was believed to serve as patron to a spectacular fluorescence of the arts. Included among the most famous of the "Mangbetu Arts" are the anthropomorphic musical instruments and carved ivory that command high prices on European markets today.

The exhibit and its accompanying catalog describe the complex interaction among the multiethnic Mangbetu polity, the neighboring Azande chiefdoms to the north, and the multiple cultural groups to the south with whom they competed. They examine how extensive political interaction combined with trade and marital alliance to produce a regional system with shared material culture. The catalog provides a splendid reconstruction of the social, political, and economic history of the period while making the case that there is very little distinctively "Mangbetu" about the art and material culture of the precolonial Mangbetu. Catalog authors Keim and Schildkrout unravel the threads of this complicated story through an ideal combination of meticulous scholarship and analytical skill. The culture history is marred only by Jan Vansina's unsubstantiated attempt to provide an evolutionary just-so story of differences between the Mangbetu and surrounding peoples. Keim and Schildkrout are politely discrete about how their well-documented account undercuts Vansina's speculations. But the region's culture history is merely the backdrop to the story Keim and Schildkrout wish to tell. Schweinfurth's account of the court of Mbunza apparently told a tale of a court that existed more in his imagination than in fact. No record can be found of the splendid anthropomorphic "Mangbetu" objects in European collections that date from Mbunza's court. Those objects instead derive from a colonial encounter in which successive travelers and administrators sought the artistic successors to Mbunza, who had been killed in political struggles shortly before colonial rule was so brutally established by King Leopold in his personal fiefdom, the Congo Free State.

Keim and Schildkrout relate that Mbunza's multiethnic successors were only too happy to respond to their colonial rulers' requests for artifacts of the "Mangbetu" type. When Lang and Chapin could not find a royal enclosure

like Mbunza's, for instance, the colonial chief Okondo built one for them. Subsequent visitors then rediscovered Mbunza's great hall in Okondo's village. Portraiture (a European genre if ever there was one) flourished, and the great objects of Mangbetu art were made as gifts for European travelers, administrators, and missionaries. The "reflections" to which the show's title refers are ironic and distorted. The "Mangbetu," who are not really "pure" Mangbetu, became increasingly Mangbetu-like as they conformed to a European vision of King Solomon's Mines in northeastern Zaire. Like tourists everywhere, the administrators, missionaries, and (in this case) naturalists returned home with "authentic" treasures. So successful was the myth of authenticity mutually created by colonizer and colonized, however, that it penetrated the art market, which otherwise denies the aesthetic interest of African objects that are not stylistically central and ethnically pure. I wonder how many art museums will strip this exhibit of its wonderful ironic story when it travels, and show it as "Mangbetu Art." Myths have great staying power.

*African Reflections* also demonstrates how the peoples of northeastern Zaire cooperated to create brilliantly crafted objects out of local cultural resources and rich regional materials. The exhibit not only shows how the myth of Mangbetu art was produced by multiple reflections in the mirrors of a colonial funhouse: it also demonstrates that the hybrid cultures of northeastern Zaire produced arts of great vigor and beauty, even at the onset of one of the most vicious moments in human history.

Both the exhibit and the catalog are particularly adept in their illustration of art's multiple inputs. The displays are among the most interesting exhibits of non-Western material culture I have ever seen. The exhibit leads its audience through a very complex story in a way that is nothing short of superb. The high point is surely the diorama-like mannekin of King Mbunza reconstructed from Schweinfurth's famous drawing. Behind the mannekin is a blown-up picture of Schweinfurth's drawing of Mbunza's great hall, while the display is accompanied by a reproduction of the drawing itself. I saw teenage boys spend ten minutes comparing objects in the drawing with the objects accompanying the mannekin. This is no small achievement for any exhibit!

Even more important is the way the developing narrative is broken into sections so that the visitor "reads" the story of Mangbetu art in multiple ways. The first sections set the regional scene and describe the movement to a colonial polity. The "Myth of Mbunza" is then presented in the diorama. This is fol-

lowed by sections that present various "Mangbetu" objects and aspects of life; each of these sections is accompanied by a musical recording. The photographs and objects displayed provide a sense of setting, while the objects indicate the importance of these peoples' appreciation of form. Even the ubiquitous spears show how artful were the complex forms created out of metal. In fact, the spears may be the most significant achievement of Mangbetu artistry. The display is seemingly reminiscent of turn-of-the-century ethnographic exhibits of multiple forms, but here this exhibiting device emphasizes the significance of local aesthetic standards.

This point is tellingly made in the sections on architecture, and, especially, Lang's photographs on body decoration: the famous shaped heads on Mangbetu harps were also shaped on Mangbetu bodies. Fashion and aesthetics obviously reached into much of people's lives. Women's skirts and children's heads were equally the subject of aesthetic elaboration. More than most other exhibits, *African Reflections* demonstrates how encompassing secular aesthetics can be in an African society. These aesthetic standards were elaborated more with regard to the head than any other part of the body. Not only were heads shaped, they were dressed with multiple "hats," the uses of which were often context-specific. Lang and Chapin collected them, but Keim and Schildkrout had the wit to see how significant they were in local life.

The range of objects in this exhibit and its challenges to Western aesthetic canons make *African Reflections* one of the most important African exhibits ever mounted. Among the many achievements of this exhibit is the way it historicizes its audience's sense of how to view a collection of non-Western objects. It presents the aesthetics of an object's manufacture while demonstrating that even objects made for colonial travelers and officials display the aesthetic achievements and obsessions of the people who made them. *African Reflections* challenges the tendency of art museums to obliterate the taste of peoples without power in the name of universal (modernist) aesthetics. This exhibit establishes that without ethnography and history the displays of non-Western objects are simply another distorted reflection of the colonial context.

### **Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries.**

An exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 10, 1990–January 13, 1991.

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