
Deborah Stokes
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART

Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display is a significant collection of 13 essays detailing the social and historical circumstances affecting the collection, classification, and presentation of African material culture in a number of select American art museums. Of the more than one hundred public, private, and university museums in the United States with permanent collections of African art, Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke have assembled a group of intriguing case studies. Written by practicing museum and independent curators, the essays offer engaging stories about the foundational patrons of the selected museums and describe the symbiotic association between donor and museum along with the simultaneous emergence of historians of the art of Africa as a newly professionalized sector within the museum establishment.

In a broad historical introduction, Berzock and Clarke frame the collection of essays within European and American Victorian-era cultural attitudes about Africa, its peoples, and the subsequent institutional practice of designating African objects by functionality. The authors argue that it was the early 20th-century pioneering scholarship of art historians integrating modernist aesthetics, connoisseurship, and the concept of “masterpiece” that profoundly impacted the amendment of established anthropological categories of artifact and material culture within the domain and status of fine art.

The first essay by Christine Mullen Kreamer discusses the history of ethnographic material collected in the late 19th century (1889) by an Indiana-born rubber trader in central Africa, Carl Steckelmann, and his relationship with the Cincinnati Museum Association, later renamed the Cincinnati Art Museum. Several of the essays that follow provide accounts of founding patrons, already well-known collectors of European and modern art, who later incorporated African art into their holdings. Clarke documents the collections history leading up to the 1925 opening of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania, and the parallel development of Barnes and his philosophy of art appreciation. Nelson Rockefeller’s contribution to the founding of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) in New York City is a key story in the mid-century record. Kate Ezra illuminates the importance of Rockefeller and his advisors in decontextualizing African art using the formalist approach of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). This account includes the transfer of the entire MPA into the expansive Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1982. Dominique and John de Menil are profiled by Marie-Thérèse Brincard and their distinctive formation of the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. All three essays discuss the importance of dealers and various advisors who helped shape the aesthetic choices of these collections.

Pamela McKluskey’s lengthy study of the idiosyncratic collecting strategies of Katherine White records the final disposition of the collection at the Seattle Art Museum. William Siegmann explains the importance of Stewart Culin, a self-taught ethnographer and the first curator of ethnology at the Brooklyn Museum. Maxwell Stewart and his Iowan engineering company along with his foundation’s mission to foster peace, freedom, and justice are richly portrayed by Victoria Rovine. Mary Lou Hultgren describes in detail Hampton University alumnus William H. Sheppard—missionary, human rights activist, and personal friend of the Kuba royal court in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Other noteworthy collection histories include the Cleveland Museum of Art (Petridis), the Art Institute of Chicago (Berzock), the Indiana University Art Museum (Pelrine), Fowler Museum at UCLA (Berns, Roberts, and Ross), and the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) (Binkley, Freyer, Kreamer, Nicolls, and Purpura), citing the roles of numerous museum donors, trustees, educators, philosophers, and curators. The collective essay on the NMAfA grapples with the tensions between tradition and modernity as the collection policy embraces both important historical and contemporary African art.

Several of the essays emphasize the discourse between the original collector-patron and curators who were often constrained by strict conditions.
bequeathed for a collection’s maintenance, exhibition, and display set down by the founder. The chapter authors signal some of the ways in which art museums and curators were able, whether through necessity, choice, or dictate, to make creative and strategic use of their collections of African art. Each of the essays can stand on its own and could be read independently by an audience with a basic knowledge or interest in African art. Taken together, they document the formation of some of the key 20th-century collections of African art that were being exhibited and transferred from private hands into the public domain and that helped to shape the existing canon. The volume contains substantial endnotes that interested readers will find most useful in extending the depth of these narrative accounts. This anthology is a serious orientation, introduction, and installment for students of art history, anthropology, museum studies, and collections history, and an entrée for others who are fascinated by the stories of our public institutions.


Lena Mortensen
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The ancient city known as Copan in what is now western Honduras once boasted a startling array of sculpted stone artwork. The artistry of Copan’s many freestanding monuments ("stelae" and "altars") have become iconic of the site and lent it distinction for well over a century. Less familiar are the highly intricate carved scenes that decorated the faces of public and domestic architecture, most of which have fallen, been repurposed, or were simply carted off in the centuries since the time of the site’s classic period occupation. In recent years, through the dedicated work of scholars, project members, and community residents, much of this artwork has been painstakingly reassembled and, since 1996, showcased in an on-site museum dedicated to the subject matter. The new book by Barbara Fash, The Copan Sculpture Museum, is a well-illustrated, accessibly written, and long-awaited companion volume for this institution of the same name.

On the whole, the book makes for a very interesting extension of the visitor experience at this well-known and well-visited site. It does for the museum what it cannot do for itself; namely, it takes the reader–visitor into the rich archaeological context that grounds the interpretations presented in the exhibits and provides a general introduction to the art and history of the ancient Maya from the vantage point of Copan and, particularly, its ancient rulers. In a much less common move, the book also situates the museum’s history against the backdrop of decades of research at the site as well as the important partnerships out of which the project evolved, highlighting especially the initial and ongoing support of Honduran institutions. We learn about the stylistic choices that informed the building’s innovative design, the evolving consideration of iconographic interpretations, and the particular challenges of reconstructing and conserving the fragile sculpture. Readers are also able to gain an appreciation for the sheer amount of work—both intellectual and physical labor—that goes into building a museum of this scope in this setting.

Chapter 1 delivers the “Story of the Copan Sculpture Museum,” recounting in refreshing detail the collaborations among various specialists, government officials, and scores of local community members who collectively brought this institution to life. From her standpoint as one of the prime movers behind the museum and codirector of the long-running Copan Mosaics Project from which it grew, the author relates an intimate history of the museum’s conception and construction, sharing numerous anecdotes and referring to key actors by first name in a style that invites readers to connect in more personal ways with the monumental form of the museum and its contents.

Nine of the book’s 12 chapters focus on the progression of the museum’s 58 exhibits, providing descriptive close-ups for many motifs and architectural features of the sculpted stone panels and monuments. These chapters approach the subject matter thematically, following the logic of the museum’s interpretive design, and move through topics such as “Underworld Symbolism,” “Warfare and Ritual,” “Scribes and Sculptors,” and “Nobles and Residences.” Given the museum’s focused scope, the book is able to give nearly full treatment to the entire contents of the exhibits, making for a kind of extended catalogue of the collection elaborated by useful...