

of the human species, the “Persian” rugs that cocooned the famous couch encouraged a more abstract thought process. For in Vienna at 1900 it was believed that the ornamental art of weaving, with its arabesques, rhythms, and repetitions, and with its dizzying alteration of figure and ground, was a visual analogue to the “free association” that Freud demanded of his patients for their talking cure. Add to the power of tapestry’s patterns the mysteries of the weaver’s craft (the rapid twists, returns, and knots remain technically opaque even when observed up close in the workshop) and the result is a depth of imagery over and above—and under and in-between—the enigmatic pictures and stories that Kentridge’s designs encompass.

These are ancient metaphors. Thought is a thread. The storyteller spins yarns. And poets do something more: they weave. The great poem can be likened to a weaving or tapestry because it doesn’t simply set forth plot and characters but also conjures an entire world, a cosmos encompassing events, peoples, and places and embracing, too, ourselves as, listening, we are psychically woven into that tapestry. Later, the scribes began to write down—first in scroll, then in codex—these poetical weavings. And when they achieved on the written page a thing of similar consistency and complexity as the poem, they called what they made a text. The word comes from the Latin *textus* (“thing woven”) from *texere* (“to weave, braid, fabricate, build”), and before that from Proto-Indo-European *teks* (“to weave, to make, to make wicker or wattle”). So originally the text was a weaving, and only subsequently, by analogy and metaphor, did text become writing or Scripture.

Kentridge’s tapestries return texts to this primordial condition. The artist’s texts—the stories this poet-artist tells in imagery, in performance, and in the enigmatic narratives of his “drawings for projection,” are all about the imponderables of history, memory, and the human condition. In the tapestries, through the weaver’s craft, these become texts in that original sense of weavings. Examined closely, as this exhibition allowed us effortlessly to do, these collaborative creation do what great tapestries do plus reciting the poems that Kentridge, over the course of his career, has through his images composed.

JOSEPH LEO KOERNER is the Thomas Professor of History of Art and Architecture and Senior Fellow at the Society of Fellows at Harvard University. His books include The Moment of Self-Portraiture in Germany Renaissance Art (1993), The Reformation of the Image (2004), and Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life (forthcoming 2016). koerner@fas.harvard.edu

exhibition review

Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria

National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC
September 17, 2014–
July 31, 2016

reviewed by Mark Auslander

“Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria” explores several overlapping historical relationships: between colonialism, postcolonialism, and photography; between the medium of photography and classic Benin Kingdom metal plaques and hip ornaments; and between photography as a mode of documenting and constituting interior domestic life and photography as a technology of royal ritual action. The exhibition emerges out of a collection of 3,000 images, including many glass plates and silver gelatin prints by Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, the first official photographer to the royal court of Benin, now housed at the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the National Museum of African Art. The photographs are juxtaposed with works drawn from the Museum’s significant collection of classic Benin art.

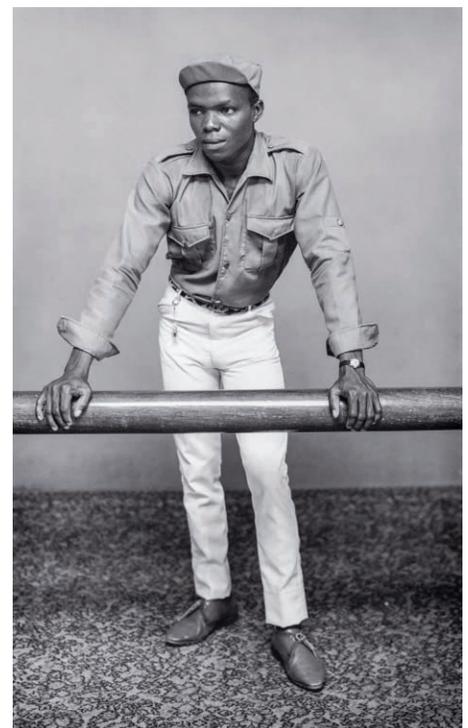
Lead curator and chief archivist Amy Staples, co-curator Bryna Freyer, and consulting

curator Flora Kaplan contextualize Alonge (1911–1994) in terms of an extended history of visual politics in the Benin Kingdom. The capacity to establish authoritative framings of visual experience and to organize apprehensions of dynamic exchanges between visible and invisible domains has long been central to royal ideologies of sovereignty in the kingdom (Freyer 1989, Gore 2007, Ben-Amos Girshick 2007). The adornment, painting, and scarification of the bodies of the Oba, Queen Mother, and others associated with the royal court, in stasis or in motion, dramatize and help constitute the flow of ancestral potencies into the mortal world. In many respects, power in the Benin Kingdom is a supremely visual technology, radiantly binding together royals and commoners while diminishing, even crushing, the capacity of opponents. Visual display is often used to dramatize structural oppositions, while simultaneously highlighting the sovereign’s sacral capacities to transcend all opposition (Nevadomsky 1983–84).

The exhibition cleverly deploys this aesthetic of dramatized, and transcended, opposition throughout the installation. The opening hallway displays on the left a large, blown-up reproduction of Reginald Kerr Granville’s well-known image of the sacked place courtyard following the 1897 British punitive expedition. Affixed to poles before the image are three important royal Benin bronze plaques, evocative of the great cache of bronzes looted by the British Admiralty and eventually acquired by museums and collectors around

1 “Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria” at the National Museum of African Art. Central gallery of exhibition, showing both the studio side and court photography.
Photo: Franko Khoury





2 Solomon Osagie Alonge
Stella Osarhiere Gbinigie, age 16 (ca. 1950)
Hand-colored photograph
Chief S.O. Alonge Collection, EEPA 2009-007-1787
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives
Photo: courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

3 Solomon Osagie Alonge
Rest After Toil (ca. 1937)
Photograph
Chief S.O. Alonge Collection, EEPA 2009-007-0080
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives
Photo: courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

4 Solomon Osagie Alonge
Young man and handrail (ca. 1950)
Photograph
Chief S.O. Alonge Collection, EEPA 2009-007-0101
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives
Photo: courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

the world. Facing this assemblage, a large color photograph by George Osodi of the present Oba Erediauwa, who has reigned from 1979 to the present, in full regalia, looks back at this moment of crisis from the vantage point of restored sovereignty a century later. An adjacent carved Benin elephant tusk (a monopoly of the monarch) depicts the king with legs of mudfish, further emphasizing the king's capacity to mediate between visible and invisible levels of experience, binding the spirit world (*erinmwin*) and the material world (*agbon*) on behalf of all his people (Gore 2007:29–30, Blackmun 1997).

The next section deftly reviews the power of photography in the colonial project in Nigeria.

Images of the Oba Ovonramwen, who reigned 1888–1897, in exile and related imperial iconography (including a magazine cover celebrating Queen's Elizabeth II's visit to Nigeria) stress the pacification of the once-independent polity. (The exhibition celebrates the 100th anniversary of Nigeria as an amalgamated country, and honors the last independent ruler of Benin, Oba Ovonramwen, who transitioned to the ancestors in 1914.)

The central gallery again is organized around an aesthetic of paired opposition and transcendence. The left wall emphasizes Alonge's biography and his studio practice, documenting family life and the emergent culture of the local bourgeoisie. Facing this is a major section on Alonge's work as court photographer, bringing out subtle affinities between Alonge's photographic practice and the ritual efficacy of earlier artistic works (Fig. 1).

In the studio section, Staples calls our attention to the democratization of visual representation over the course of the twentieth century. Image-making is no longer monopolized by the court, but is part and parcel of proliferating practices of creative self-fashioning by diverse women and men. Photographic self-portraits of Alonge himself nicely suggest this point, showing his carefully tailored elegance and ease as he moves between domains of church, business and royal court.

Of the many studio images displayed, among the most striking is a grand photograph of the Benin Social Circle, a club that boasted among its members many of the region's emergent elite. Only men were allowed to be formal members of the circle, and the picture does center in these impor-

tant men, whose wives are seated off to the side. Many other images, however, showcase the growing sophistication and influence of women in the 1940s and 1950s. Especially noteworthy is a brilliant photograph, hand-tinted by Alonge himself, of Stella Osarhiere Gbinigie, daughter of the founder of the Benin Social Circle, at age 16 (Fig. 2). She rests extended on a studio divan, dressed in her mother's clothing and jewelry, adornment that elegantly integrates Yoruba, Western, and Benin aesthetics.



Taken together, Alonge's studio works constitute a fascinating social history of Benin interior and public life, illustrating local struggles to navigate between local and transnational orientations. An enigmatic photograph centers on a young woman elegantly dressed in Western dress, her hair in a "natural" style. To her right a man (perhaps her husband) lounges in Yoruba-style adornment, his arm comfortably wrapped around her; to her left another man (perhaps her brother) sits erect, a bit apart, dressed in Western suit and bow tie. I was especially fascinated by the glass plate entitled "Rest after toil": a man sits in a T-shirt and traditional wrap, listening to an open Victrola (Fig. 3). We can guess the era by the *West African Pilot* newspaper resting on the adjacent cabinet, open to headlines about Stalin and Haile Selassie. Presumably the photograph dates to between 1935, when the Italians invaded Ethiopia, and May 1936, when Selassie went into exile. (We may speculate that the Victrola is playing a popular calypso song about the "Roaring Lion of Judah" or other antiwar songs that circulated in the transatlantic during the mid-1930s from Trinidad to West Africa.) Visitors can illuminate the glass plate by pressing a button to turn on a hidden LED, bringing to life this elusive historical moment. Another noteworthy image shows a young man in a work shirt leaning on a hand-rail (Fig. 4).

Facing the studio displays is the extended section of Alonge's career as royal court photographer, following his appointment to the post in 1933 by the late Oba Akenzua II. A segment on commemorative textiles centers on works produced upon the death of the Queen Mother. We also see Alonge's original silver

gelatin print of Oba Akenzua II, ca. 1937, and the commemorative textile onto which his likeness was reproduced following his death in 1978. Equally intriguing is Alonge's famous hand-colored photograph of Oba Akenzua II, bowing slightly as he shakes hands with visiting Queen Elizabeth II (Fig. 5). The wall text notes the controversy occasioned by this mass-reproduced image of the king shaking hands with a non-kin female.

The royal section further develops our understanding of the rich visual poetics of Benin court life, past and present. At the gallery's center is a stunning installation of an *eben* (fanlike sword), ingeniously mounted with a single curved wire that gives it the appropriate illusion of motion, crossed with an *aba* (curved sword) to produce the famous crossed emblem of the Benin kingdom (Fig. 6). An adjacent video monitor shows the *eben* being danced and twirled in front of the Oba, conveying the political and ritual power of visual display in the polity. A related point is made by the attached installation of male court attire bearing the applique designs redolent of the region's cultural heritage no longer inscribed directly upon a person's skin through scarification, these marks of power continue to attract awe in a new form.

For reasons of limited space, one of the most interesting aspects of the exhibition is rather tricky to discern. Two intricate metal pendants are displayed, each with a corresponding Alonge photograph in which subjects are posed in a fashion similar to that seen on the plaque. In one pendant, for example, a chief is held up by his flanking attendants, a configuration echoed in the accompanying photograph (c.f.



5 Oba Akenzua II greets Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip (not shown) on a Royal visit to Benin City. On the left is Chief Jeremiah Obafemi Awolowo, first Premier of the Western Region, 1952-1959. On the right is Sir John Rankine, Governor, Western Region, Nigeria, 1954-1960. Hand-colored photograph by Solomon Osagie Alonge, 1956
Chief S.O. Alonge Collection, EEPA 2009-007-1796
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives
Photo: courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

6 Case showing crossed *eben* and *ada* swords
Photo: Franko Khoury

Kaplan 1990, 1991a, 1991b). These pairings seem to imply that photography both continues and illuminates ancient forms of bodily habitus. I do wish this tantalizing insight could have been developed in more detail.

As I finished touring the gallery, I contemplated a large blown-up reproduction of an early photograph of a royal palace ancestral shrine, sporting cast heads and sacred metal bells. In front of the reproduction are placed an actual metal head and bell. Next to this assemblage is a small installation covered in protective cloth. Visitors are invited to lift the cloth and to gaze at the beautiful original albumen cabinet card of the ancestral shrine taken by Cyril Punch before the British 1897 invasion. We have in a sense come full circle from the exhibition's opening disturbing photographic image of the Oba's palace, shattered by British conquest. Here, we quietly gaze back in time to an early image of productive sacrality, reminding us that across more than a century of tumultuous history, the polity's enduring dialectic of mystery and revelation continues to bless its subjects and all who visit it.

The royal shrine segment caused this visitor to reexamine the case directly across from

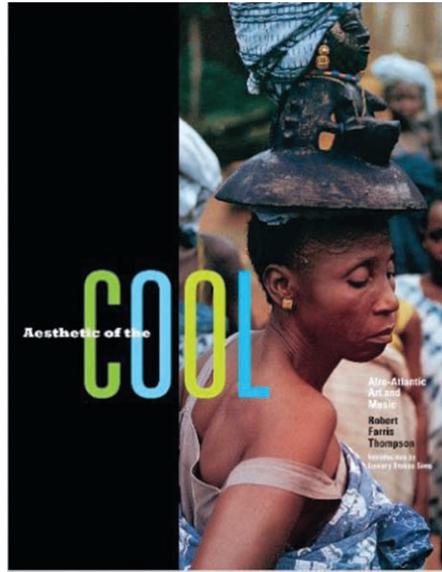
it, on the “personal” side of the gallery. Here we see gathered the private possessions of Alonge himself: his favorite book, *Character Building*, the musical instrument he played for three decades at his Baptist church, his Kodak Brownie camera, and various commemorative objects, including a plastic measuring cup, embossed with a photographic self-portrait of Alonge following his passing. Suddenly, I got the point: in a society that has been for centuries geared towards visually resplendent rites mediating between the living and dead, Alonge’s mastery of photographic representation has helped enable his transition to venerable ancestral status. Photography in Benin on the one hand has been a technology of royal power, helping to enable the remarkable continuity of this vibrant tradition-based polity within the modern Nigerian nation-state. Simultaneously, photography has been instrumental to cycles of social and spiritual reproduction for all Benin persons, moving them through cycles of life towards productive ancestorhood. This dichotomy is elegantly dramatized, and ultimately bridged, by this sophisticated, thought-provoking exhibition.

MARK AUSLANDER is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Museum Studies at Central Washington University, where he directs the Museum of Culture and Environment. He writes on ritual, political cosmology, and popular aesthetics in Africa and Afro-Atlantic communities, and is the author of *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (University of Georgia Press, 2011). auslanderm@cwu.edu

References cited

- Blackmun, Barbara Winston. 1997. “Continuity and Change: The Ivories of Ovonramwen and Eweka II.” *African Arts* 30 (3):68–79, 94–96.
- Kaplan, Flora S. 1990. “Some Use of Photographs in Recovering Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria.” *Visual Anthropology* 3:317–41.
- _____. 1991a. “Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recording Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin.” *History in Africa* 18:205–37.
- _____. 1991b. “Benin Art Revisited: Photographs and Museum Collections.” *Visual Anthropology* 4:117–45.
- Freyer, Bryna. 1989. *Royal Benin Art*. Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- Gore, Charles. 2007. *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City*. London; Edinburgh University Press.
- Ben-Amos Girshick, Paula. 2007. “The Symbolism of Ancestral Altars in Benin.” In *Benin Kings and Rituals: Royal Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner, pp. 161–70. Ghent, Belgium: Snoerk Publishers.
- Nevadomsky, Joseph. 1983–84. “Kingship Succession Rituals in Benin. Part I: Becoming a Crown Prince.” *African Arts* 17 (1):47–54, 87; “Part II: The Big Things.” *African Arts* 17 (2):41–47, 90–91; “Part III: The Coronation of an Oba.” *African Arts* 17 (3):48–57, 91–92.

book review



Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music by Robert Farris Thompson
Pittsburgh: Periscope Publishing, 2011. 179 pages, 119 color illustrations, 43 b/w illustrations, bibliography of author’s writings. \$40.00, cloth

reviewed by Tobias Wofford

His students refer to him as “Master T.” The honorific references Robert Farris Thompson’s enduring presence at Yale University as Master of Timothy Dwight College, but it also reflects his preeminence in the field of African and African Diaspora art history for the last half-century. Thompson’s 2011 book, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music*, provides a glimpse of his contribution to the field through a collection of short writings from throughout his important career. While the book takes the form of disparate case studies, it puts forth the thesis that there is a complicated, yet cohesive, aesthetic that connects Africa and its westward diasporas into a unique cultural sphere: the Afro-Atlantic. Through many specific analyses, Thompson’s vivid, vibrant prose describes the ways in which African social and visual philosophies are maintained and transmitted around the world through visual art, music, and everyday practice. While Thompson may be best known for large-scale projects such as the exhibitions “Black Gods and Kings” (1971) and “African Art in Motion” (1974) as well as discipline-defining monographs such as his widely disseminated and well-loved *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philoso-*

phy (1983), such texts often overshadow the important ways in which Thompson’s theoretical framings and cultural analyses have been formulated and refracted through the form of the short essay: a fact that *Aesthetic of the Cool* makes strikingly clear. In all, the book demonstrates the far-reaching ambition in Thompson’s career-long project of describing the unifying characteristics of Afro-Atlantic art and culture.

Thompson defines the “aesthetic of the cool” that he identifies throughout African and African diasporic culture as a “deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and play” (p. 16). The book seems to embody this aspect of the cool with its large format and extensive illustrations that give the volume the feel of a high-production exhibition catalog rather than a collection of essays. Mixing elements both serious and pleasurable, the visual appeal and pleasing prose of the book are balanced by the theoretical rigor found in the included essays and interviews.

In all, the volume contains twenty-three essays and two interviews with Thompson, presented roughly in chronological order according to their original dates of publication. They range from his early 1966 essay on African and African Diaspora music in “Aesthetic of the Cool” to the more recent 2005 “Kongo Louisiana/Kongo New Orleans.” The book also includes a previously unpublished essay on the art of famed contemporary artist David Hammons. The texts’ original publishing venues vary from popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone* to scholarly journals like *African Arts*. This reflects yet another way in which the volume (like Thompson’s scholarship) collapses genres, but also makes accessible a number of essays that are normally difficult to find. For example, the sampling of rare writings includes “The Afro-Cuban Departure of Mongo Santamaria” reprinted from the liner notes of the 1960s LPs *Más Sabroso* and *¡Arriba! La Pachanga*. In addition, Lowery Stokes Sims introduces the volume and it concludes with a bibliography of Thompson’s writings.

The essays gathered here cover a broad scope of topics including music, dance, and visual art and the context of their production range from arts in daily life, including Haitian buses called tap-tap and break-dancing in the Bronx, to art made by some of the most well-known contemporary artists. This array of subject matter underscores Thompson’s abilities as a cultural theorist as he deftly, and at times poetically, tests his conception of the Afro-Atlantic, convincingly demonstrating the durability and versatility of propositions such as the aesthetic of the cool.

The collapsing of genres, space, and time is