Mud Masons of Mali
Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of Natural History
Washington, DC
August 31, 2013–continuing
reviewed by Robert T. Soppela

“Mud Masons of Mali,” currently on display in the Focus Gallery of the African Voices hall at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, is an exhibition by and about the masons of Djenné, a city on the banks of the Bani River in Mali. Djenné is a UNESCO World Heritage Site where ancient African traditions of building with mud are still practiced today.

The exhibition opens with a brief wall text explaining its purpose. Next to it are portraits and brief biographies of five of the masons currently working in Djenné, who were interviewed and filmed for the project. The men are members of a guild, or barey ton, that controls the art of building in Djenné to this day. They all belong to the Boso people, the group that founded the city eight centuries ago. Four are master masons, one is an apprentice/college student. Projected on the back wall of the exhibition space is a video in which the masons discuss their profession and its modern developments and limitations in filmed interviews. The narration, in Boso, is viewable with subtitles in either English or French. The film is presented in four parts: an introduction to the city and the five masons; a discussion of the trade secrets of traditional Malian masonry; a discussion of the challenges of modernism and recent history; and a final section entitled “Travels and Troubles” about recent events and current prospects.

The walls of the exhibition space are covered by large-format photographs of traditional mud buildings in Djenné, including houses in the Tukulor style, which feature buttressed, hooded entrances, and the Moroccan style, that has no porch and small, ornate windows. Also present is Djenné’s fantastic grand mosque, possibly the greatest extant example of traditional West African mud architecture, which is replastered annually in a ceremony involving the whole community. During this event, masons pass on the techniques of their craft to younger generations. The filmed interviews and photographs are supplemented in the gallery by cases where the tools used in Malian masonry are displayed and identified (trowels, crowbars, wooden molds for brickmaking, plumb lines and weights for use in construction; and physical materials: baskets for carrying clay, palmwood beams, grains and other “secret” materials placed under new constructions during blessing ceremonies, as offerings to guarantee success in building).

During the interviews, the masons discuss the apprenticeships which all masons undergo, and the special relationships between apprentice and master mason. The spiritual dimensions of the training and craft are discussed as well, as are the necessity of blessings from master prior to the apprentice assuming the responsibilities of a master mason.

The men discuss the Aga Khan-funded project of 2009 for the restoration of the mosque and its unfortunate psychological effect on the people of the city: the annual replastering of the exterior of the mosque added significantly to its substance, and was a major source of civic cooperation and pride. The restored mosque, with much sharper contours, looked too “thin” and much less substantial to the people of Djenné. Their interpretation of this event and its alteration of the grand mosque’s mass and appearance provide poignant commentary on the complex, often strained relationships between ancient practices, traditional beliefs and customs, modernization, and historical preservation efforts.

Problems have arisen with the confrontation between urban modernization and the strict preservation rules caused by the city’s designation as a world heritage site in 1988. City dwellers in Mali want to use modern building materials like concrete and tin for their buildings, but these are not permitted in historic districts. Younger generations seek lucrative employment in Bamako and other big cities, and this threatens to deplete the number of workers who know how to (or can afford to) practice traditional skills. The difficulties faced by the youth of today are articulated by Almamy Kouroumansé, the youngest of the five masons, who is still an apprentice in his 20s. He has studied modern building practices at a school in Bamako and learned much but has returned to Djenné to work in his native city. In his own words, “...I cannot modify what exists. I can only beneficially add to what the elder generation has left, and gain experience by their side.”

Climate vagaries also contribute to the difficulty of preservation, particularly the continuing severe drought in the region. This situation became still more complicated with the political upheaval in Mali in 2012, echoes of which remain today, and the resultant collapse of tourism in the country. These issues are discussed by the masons with sympathy and insight.

The importance of the annual replastering of the mosque as an event that unites the community is repeatedly mentioned and visually demonstrated by film of the recent partial re-establishment of the event, filmed by the
Masons themselves during a time when the Europeans and Americans could not travel to Mali. Comments about the economic difficulties faced by craftsmen practicing a traditional art in a modern environment during trying times are presented in a straightforward manner, as they bear directly on the survival of Malian traditional architecture.

The exhibition includes a computer component where cyber visitors can see the filmed interviews, review a portfolio of twenty-nine photographs of Djenne, its people, their building, watch the annual replastering of the great mosque, and, in the final section, learn about the challenges of recent times. This component is visible at mnh.si.edu, and will remain available after the exhibition closes (the end date is listed on the museum website as “indefinite”) to the general public and to students of all levels, as it is presented in simple, direct language, richly illustrated with videos and photographs. It is will also provide valuable information to scholars specializing in African studies who haven’t been or cannot get to Mali, as it presents an in-depth discussion by African masons of an African art form which has been preserved after centuries of use, and more than a century of modern developments. Smithsonian Curator of African Ethnology Dr. Mary Jo Arnoldi and her international team of colleagues led by Dr. Trevor Marchand of London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies are to be congratulated on a job well done. The masons in particular made the project meaningful by sharing their stories and explaining the processes and meaning of their professional practices. This small exhibition, structured around the voices of actual Africans, is superbly presented, and perfectly suited to the African Voices Hall at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

Robert T. Soppelsa has studied the arts of Africa since 1968. He recently retired as senior curator for the Art in Embassies Office of the U.S. State Department. Bob.soppelsa@verizon.net

Shangaa: Art of Tanzania
Edited by Gary Van Wyk
New York: QCC Art Gallery, 2013. 341 pages, 315 color illustrations, 45 b/w illustrations, 3 maps, bibliography, index. $95.00, cloth

reviewed by Kevin Tervala

If one were to populate a map of Africa using only the books, articles, and exhibition catalogs written about the continent’s art and architecture, the resulting document would little resemble the land mass we know today. While the western and central portions of the continent would be remarkably detailed, the north and south would be littered with holes. And in the east—well, in the east, there would be almost nothing except a note: “Here be dragons.” Enter Gary Van Wyk and his magisterial edited volume Shangaa: Art of Tanzania. Published in 2013 alongside an eponymous exhibition, the collection features ten chapters, seven shorter essays, and over three hundred breathtaking illustrations (most in color), all of which do much to combat the “astounding … notion that Tanzania is poor in art” (p. 25). Indeed, as Van Wyk spells out in his introduction, the alleged dearth of artistry in Tanzania has more to do with the particularities of colonial and post-colonial history than it does with any lack of creativity or production. Although a handful of previous publications had sought to correct this myth, their success was limited by language, small publication runs, and an almost complete reliance on black-and-white images. However,