African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of L'Art nègre and the Harlem Renaissance
by Christa Clarke
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reviewed by Pamela Allara

African Art in the Barnes Foundation is an important scholarly publication masquerading as a coffee table art book. A comprehensive catalogue of its subject, the sixty-seven works in the collection are each provided with full-page color reproductions. (And by isolating each sculpture on a grey ground, Rick Echelmeyer implicitly acknowledges the photographic legacies of Man Ray, Charles Sheeler, and Walker Evans.) Christa Clarke’s comprehensive introductory essay, “Albert Barnes, the Barnes Foundation, and African Art,” provides the history of Barnes’s approach to and philosophy of collecting, while the short scholarly essays accompanying each object offer a précis of current research in the field of African art history: ‘The tone thus provides a rich compendium for both the eyes and the mind.’

Clarke’s introductory essay argues that the Foundation holds an important place in the reception of African art in the West because, “[i]t was one of the first permanent installations in the United States to display objects from Africa as fine art, in an era when such works were typically presented as cultural artifacts in ethnographic museums” (p. 21). Clarke argues further that in addition to his deep appreciation of African art, Barnes “believed that the study of African art, as an important form of black cultural expression, could serve as a tool for racial advancement and equality” (p. 22). For those familiar with the life of this cantankerous and competitive collector, the latter premise may seem far-fetched initially, but the author carefully unpacks these arguments in the following pages, convincingly demonstrating that “African art deserves to be seen as central to the aesthetic mission and progressive vision that was at the very heart of the Barnes Foundation” (p. 23).

If Albert Barnes was not the earliest American collector of African art, he certainly was the most ambitious and confident of them. In the section titled “Albert Barnes, Paul Guillaume, and the Emerging Market for African Art,” Clarke traces Barnes’s association with the Paris-based dealer Paul Guillaume, who opened a gallery for “tableaux modernes” and sculptures nègres in 1914. Shortly thereafter, during WWI, the center for the display of African art shifted to New York, as exemplified by the pioneering exhibitions of African art at Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291 (1914) and Marius de Zayas’s Modern Gallery (1918), both of whom collaborated with Guillaume. Key to the reception of the African material as art, however, was the publication in Paris of Scultures Nègres, by Guillaume Apollinaire, with a brief introduction by Paul Guillaume (1917).

With Guillaume’s authority (and self-promotion) firmly established, Barnes entered the field in the summer of 1922, collecting forty-seven works, and continuing with major purchases for the next two years. As he wrote to Guillaume that November, “Please remember, I intend to try to have the best private collection of Negro sculpture in the world” (p. 28). Clearly in competition with important patrons of modern and African art who began collecting before WWI—such as John Quinn and Walter and Louise Arensberg—Barnes attempted to outshine them not only in size but quality. From the first he was concerned with training his eye by studying objects and texts in order to purchase works that were the finest aesthetically. As he assembled his collection he took pains to criticize works in public collections, including those of the Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Museum, even as he learned from them. Such self-education may have included trips to Robert Coady’s two galleries in New York City. Clarke speculates that Barnes may have also been familiar with Coady’s writings for The Soil, which “promoted the idea of an aesthetic relationship between the arts of Africa and African American artistic expression and, by extension, Western modernism, which he felt owed its development to the ‘Negro’ contribution” (p. 32). Surely the connection between Coady’s ideas and Barnes’s later writings cannot be entirely coincidental.

In the same year that he began to collect African art, 1922, Barnes also established his foundation for “the promotion of the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts” (p. 33). In the section on “African Art and the Educational Mission of the Barnes Foundation,” Clarke stresses that the well-established connection between modern and African art was perhaps less important than the “socially progressive mission of the Barnes Foundation” (p. 35). Here we get to the heart of Clarke’s argument: Barnes’s collection was not a vanity project (vain as he may have been), but a vehicle for social transformation. Influenced by his study of the writings of George Santayana, William James, and John Dewey, Barnes developed in his book The Art of Painting (1925) a philosophy that is based on the analysis of plastic form. Clarke argues that this approach could be “easily misconstrued as mere formalism,” but is actually “closely aligned with his interest in social reform and education,” because it fostered the integration of aesthetic and lived experiences (p. 37). Barnes claimed in his speeches that his first aesthetic experience was in a revival meeting at an African American Methodist church. In their music, dance, and poetry he found a unity and harmony that was “characteristically Negro,” and which exemplified an ideal social organization on the African continent that integrated aesthetic and lived experience before the arrival of the colonists. The Barnes Foundation opened in 1925 in Merion, PA, “making history as the first permanent installation in the United States to present objects from Africa as fine art” (p. 46). (The six double-page spreads that constitute the book’s elaborate front matter document the installation as replicated in its new quarters.)

If, from today’s perspective, Barnes’s arguments sound racist, in her essay’s final section, “Albert Barnes, African Art, and the ‘New Negro,’” Clarke argues convincingly for their progressiveness at the time by detailing Barnes’s involvement with the New Negro movement and his concern with using the study of African art as a means to social advancement. The book’s contribution to both current scholarship and the interested general reader is centered here. Her discussion of Barnes’s relationships with Alain Locke and Charles Spurgeon Johnson (later President of Fisk University) charts his direct involvement with the New Negro Movement. Not only were reproductions of works in his collection and his own writings included in important publications, including the movement’s founding text, Alain
Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture
by Yomi Ola

reviewed by Michael O. Fajuyigbe

Satires have always been an integral aspect of Yoruba life and thoughts. Yoruba visual culture often manifests through verbal arts (orature, poetry, songs), performing arts (festivals, dance, masking, and masquerades), and the visual arts (wood carving, pottery, textiles). Satires can be utilized through conscious dissemination of visual codes and innuendos in a deliberate and intelligent manner with the intent to examine issues affecting society. Against this background, Yomi Ola provides an insight into Yoruba concept and use of satire, tracing its appearance to wood sculptures by Olowe of Isé (ca. 1873–ca. 1938). He asserts that the modern manifestations of satire and social criticism in contemporary Yoruba art are vividly presented in editorial cartooning which was started by Akinola Lasekan (1916–1974) in pre-independence Nigeria. Satires of Power is situated within the larger framework of Yoruba satirical culture which encourages the use of praise and parody almost simultaneously to create an awareness regarding the political players and corruption in governance. A common feature in Yoruba cultural space, satire is expressed through masking festivals like the Efe/Gelede spectacle, and is embedded in oriki (citation praise), efo (jest), ewi (musical poetry), apara (lampoon, caricature), and awada and efe (joke and jest) as showcased by court jesters, praise singers, and other creative individuals. In this connection, the author notes that aworerin, a quasi-comic publication, paved a way for “the two-dimensional space of mass-circulating editorial cartoon in contemporary Nigeria” (p. 8).

The book is organized into five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion; endnotes clarify and excite further discussion. In the first chapter, the author discusses the use of satire in Yoruba sculpture and masking traditions like Agbeguje, Egungun, and Gelede. While asserting that the sculptural pieces of Olowe of Isé laid the foundation for visual satire in Nigeria, he however notes that satirical presentations in Yoruba artistry dates back to art of ancient Ife (p. 28). In probing the satirical elements in Yoruba wood sculptures, Yomi Ola establishes a conceptual and contextual connection between Olowe of Isé and Akinola Lasekan, thus building a bridge between traditional and contemporary satires of power in Yoruba visual culture.

The history, development, context and use of cartoons in colonial Nigeria, and the stylistic, iconographical and ideologival expressions of Lasekan are the focus of chapter 2. Lasekan, one of the first cartoonists in any colonial African political scene, employed satire to project colonialists’ excesses within the West African Pilot, a newspaper established and published by Sir Nnamdi Azikiwe. The nationalist struggles of the era, coupled with issues of oppression, domination, and racial segregation as exhibited by the colonial administration and the disunity among regional/ethnic leaders in Nigeria, provided the contexts for Lasekan’s cartoons. The chapter also hints at how cartoon producers employed semiotic resources of visual metaphors, information value, salience/emphasis, and framing, among other methods, to comment on sociopolitical and economic issues within the nation. Using formal and contextual analysis, the author examines iconographic symbolisms and colonial parody in Lasekan’s cartoons, which include The Sleeping Giant and Bane of Indirect Rule. Ola concludes that Lasekan’s cartoons prepared the groundwork for political cartooning and a vibrant culture of social commentary in Nigeria.

Chapter 3 examines evils perpetrated by past military dictatorships, the misadventures of the ruling class, and other issues that stimulate the witty and critical minds of Nigerian cartoonists. The author

Notes
1 The publication has received two book awards in 2016: from the Association of Art Museum Curators, the 2015 Award for Exception to the Catalogue/Publication, and from the University of Maryland, the James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award for African American Art History. More of Clark’s work on Albert Barnes and African art can be found in Clark 1998 and 2003.
2 Barnes’s concept of “Plastic Form” was no doubt borrowed from Roger Fry, whom he read, and may also have its source in Carl Einstein’s Negerplastik (1913). Although Clarke’s argument is convincing, I would counter that Barnes simply ignored the contradiction between his formalist approach, which dismissed context as irrelevant, and his concern for social reform.
3 Ezra cites Susan Vogel, who has suggested that a total of five sculptures can be attributed to the artist, whom she named the Barnes Foundation Master because the Seated Couple is “the best known and first published work in this group” (p. 74).

References cited