Mark Hinchman’s book *Portrait of an Island: The Architecture and Material Culture of Gorée, Sénégal, 1758–1837* examines architecture, images, documents, and objects to provide a nuanced picture of Gorée, a small Senegalese island which functioned as a principal trading post of the Senegambian region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a trading center, the island was exceptionally diverse economically, culturally, racially, and in material goods. Likewise, its size facilitated a particularly interconnected society of *signares*, a class of mixed race women of wealth and stature; Europeans of various occupations; free blacks; and slaves, both those who lived and worked on the island and those held for sale abroad. Hinchman argues that this diversity, while premodern, anticipates contemporary issues of globalism, multiculturalism, and shifting identities.
Beyond providing the reader an understanding of what life was like on Gorée during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hinchman demonstrates the need to look beyond the grand narratives of history which focus on political conquest, macroeconomics, and major monuments. While these serve a purpose, according to Hinchman, “a history that ignores the lives of ordinary people and ordinary circumstances misses most of the picture” (p. 211). In this spirit, his methodological approach is heavily anecdotal. He analyzes architecture and delves into the archival materials in an effort to uncover the stories of individual lives. Portrait of an Island builds on Hinchman’s career of teaching and research in design history, global modernism, and architectural history. He wrote the interior design textbooks History of Furniture: A Global View (Fairchild, 2009) and The Dictionary of Interior Design (Fairchild, 2014), and co-authored, with Elyssa Yoneda, Who’s Who in Interior Design (Fairchild, 2016). He has also published several articles and book chapters on the history of Gorée, on early modern West Africa, and on African urbanism. This book comprises the interests manifest in earlier studies, while providing new information in a coherent and insightful text.

Portrait of an Island is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. While the introduction presents the book’s purpose and theoretical framework, the first chapter discusses the architectural traditions of the region, its trade goods, and the urbanization of Gorée. In the early eighteenth century the island roughly comprised three villages nestled in a natural landscape. However, a major fire in 1761 and an outbreak of yellow fever in 1778 left the island vulnerable to short-lived waves of English occupation, cleared the island for urbanization, and began a period of building in “permanent” materials (fired bricks and stone instead of earth and vegetation). In this chapter, Hinchman uses cartography to discuss the memory of landscapes. His analysis of a series of maps reveals not only Gorée’s changes during this period, but sometimes documents plans that were never realized and thereby reveals certain hopes and ambitions. While maps are often perceived as impartial documents, Hinchman reiterates postcolonial scholars before him by recognizing maps’ inherent biases as necessarily selective, reductive, and dependent upon perspective.

The second chapter, “The Built Landscape: Architecture and Urbanism,” shifts the discussion of urbanization from the island as a whole to an analysis of individual buildings. Analyzing primarily architectural plans and elevations, Hinchman divides houses into certain types and breaks down the various waves of construction on the island. Foreshadowing the chapters that follow it, this chapter acknowledges the diversity of classes and peoples within a single household and introduces different ways in which the space was divided to accommodate them.

Chapters 3 through 5 take a closer look at the inhabitants of these architectural spaces and divides them roughly by socioeconomic class. Chapter 3 considers how the wealthiest and most powerful members of society, namely the signares and upper-class Europeans, interacted with the architecture of Gorée. In order to assert their elevated status, they incorporated impressive features such as freestanding staircases, fireplaces, tiles, and French doors. In an interesting anecdotal study, Hinchman compares how two historically notable elites, the signare Anne Pépin (an African-born female who managed extensive properties, servants, and slaves) and the French governor, the Chevalier de Boufflers (a European male whose letters back to Europe heavily criticize Goréen architecture’s lack of right angles and symmetry), viewed the same home quite differently, thus exposing multivalent interpretations of the architecture even by members of the same class. By noting the autonomy of signares, who often furnished and ran these households, Hinchman complicates the supposition “that colonial architecture only existed as a European tool intended to suppress Africans” (p. 148).

Hinchman continues to resist a shallow understanding of premodern, west African life in his fourth chapter, which explores issues of identity, ethnicity, and stereotypes among the middle to working classes. It considers the financial and social arrangements achieved through renting space, the relationships developed between European men and African women, and the homes and possessions of free blacks. A portion of this chapter is devoted to the situations of European scientists, artists, and an aspiring writer (who atypically lived in a straw house). In chapter 5, Hinchman examines the socioeconomic “bottom rung” of slaves and servants. He considers not only the tragedy and trauma experienced by export slaves, but also their boredom and loneliness. He examines the architectural spaces that held them and chronicles an attempted escape. This chapter also looks at the lives of resident slaves of Gorée, some of whom were afforded great trust by their masters and led lives of adventure and surprising autonomy. By exposing individual experiences, Hinchman forces the reader to consider a more complicated and more human side to slave history.

In chapter 6 Hinchman demonstrates his expertise in material culture by gleaning information from inventories, wills, and correspondences to demonstrate how items such as portraits, books, guns, and even seashells can represent important aspects of people’s lives and identities. The conclusion somewhat abruptly shifts the discussion to contemporary Gorée and exposes the controversy surrounding its role as a tourist destination. In some respects, this book directly responds to the misconception that the island was a major port in the transatlantic slave trade. While Hinchman is “more concerned with the qualitative aspects of slaves’ lives than the quantities of slaves that were traded,” he asserts that those who claim that millions passed through Gorée grossly exaggerate the numbers (p. 241).

Throughout the book Hinchman intentionally refers to the residence of Anne Pépin as the Maison Pépin rather than its tourist destination name, the Maison des Éclaves, in a purposeful move to rewrite a distorted history.

Portrait of an Island would be of most interest to scholars of vernacular architecture, material culture, west African history, and slave history. The book’s scope is simultaneously narrow, in that it deals with less than a century of a tiny island’s history, and ambitious, in that it aims to study not only its architecture, but also its residents and their possessions. Arguably, the book’s greatest weakness is that it touches on too many diverse, seemingly unrelated topics. In order to counter this, Hinchman carefully, and usually successfully, justifies the purpose of each shift in his narrative.

Perhaps the book’s greatest contribution to the field of scholarship is not its specific content, but rather its methodology. Hinchman approaches this work with knowledge of the writings of postcolonial theorists Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak, but does not burden the reader with academic, theoretical jargon. Through examining vernacular architecture, material culture, and archival documents, he establishes a multi-subjective approach to history which not only brings a richness in voices, but also questions the dominating, “official” narrative. To that end, this book serves as an ethical reclamation of Gorée’s historic importance.

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