book review

The Benin Plaques: A 16th Century Imperial Monument
by Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch
New York: Routledge, 2018, 245 pp., 150 b&w ill., glossary, biblio, index. £115, hardcover

reviewed by John Picton

Amongst the antiquities of West Africa, the rectangular cast brass plaques from Benin City are something of an oddity in the application of sculptural technical means to an essentially two-dimensional form. Indeed, because of this, William Fagg, the great British pioneer of African art studies, found that he could use the plaques as the “sheet anchor” (Fagg 1963: 33) of his chronology, enabling him to define an earlier pre-plaque period and a later post-plaque period. And while his early-middle-late scheme, when taken too literally, might seem an oversimplification, the judgment of Fagg’s form-perceptive eyes is nevertheless in general confirmed by metallurgical analysis (Craddock and Picton 1986). With the advent of European ready-made brass via trade with the Portuguese from the late fifteenth century and with other European nations from the 1530s, once the Portuguese monopoly in trade with Benin City was ended, the zinc content of the copper alloy employed in Benin City more-or-less matches the gradually expanding zinc content of European brass manufacture. Of the fifty or so plaques I selected from the British Museum collections for Paul Craddock to analyze (Craddock and Picton 1986), all were the brass appropriate to that period of European metallurgy. And if one or two had an unexpected amount of tin therein (but never enough to redefine the alloy as “bronze”) that could be explained by the caster making use of whatever was to hand—perhaps older bronzes (a commonplace strategy) or broken pieces of the bronze used in Portuguese military hardware.

In other words, the presence in the imagery of the plaques of Portuguese men in the dress of circa 1500–1550, together with the use of European brass of a composition that fits that same period, gave us a beginning point before which plaques could not have been cast. They were made to be mounted on pillars of wood around the principal courtyard of the palace, where the king received visitors and presided at significant rites and festivities, but a description of a newly rebuilt early eighteenth century palace makes no mention of them, providing a date by which the casting of plaques had probably ceased. When the British naval and military forces looted the art of the city in 1897, the plaques were located in a store room in the palace and no records were kept of where any Benin City art was located, in what order, and so on and so forth. There are no detailed descriptions of the plaques as originally installed and no list of how they were stored once removed from the pillars. In our understanding of the plaques and their place in the history of Benin City art, we seem, in other words, to be left with little more than what our eyes can tell us. Philip Dark, for example, in his studies of Benin City art (1960, 1973) proposed that those plaques showing a greater degree of high relief were probably later than the low relief plaques; William Fagg identified the hands of individual plaque masters, for example the “Master of the Circled Cross” and the “Master of the Leopard Hunt” (of whom more later; see Fagg 1963: pl. 20, 22, 23; Ekserdjian 2012: pl. 103; Picton 2012: 66, 2014: 212–13).

And there the matter rested—until the publication of Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch’s remarkable The Benin Plaques: A 16th Century Imperial Monument. I say “remarkable” because I must confess that, to begin with, I had expected, given the almost complete lack of data other than the plaques themselves, that Gunsch’s project of developing our understanding of them was likely to get nowhere in particular. Happily, I have been proved wrong! There are three essential parts to her success. First, she noticed—unlike all previous scholars—that the flanges of each of the wider plaques, which fitted around the pillars on which they were mounted, are inscribed with one or another of three distinct patterns. This has allowed her to group the plaques into three sets. Moreover, those three sets demonstrate a gradual progression from lower to higher relief, thereby confirming Dark’s hypothesis.

Secondly, Gunsch provides an effective summary of the aesthetic principles revealed by other Benin City works. These include the rectangular altar pieces, each with a symmetrically placed sequence of figures to each side of the principal royal figure, and Barbara Blackmun’s work on the imagery and its ordering across the surfaces of ivory tusks (see, for example. Blackmun 1984, 1990). This enables Gunsch to explain the duplicated sets of images that characterize the plaque corpus. With the king seated at the center of the far end of the courtyard as one entered it, in order to proceed toward him one could have passed symmetrically placed sets of images on each side of the courtyard—these perhaps providing the precedent or basis for the later altar pieces already mentioned. Gunsch is not so foolhardy as to present a placing for all known plaques, but she does present convincing evidence of how many of them could have made sense when grouped together.

Thirdly, by making use of a largely overlooked element of oral tradition, Gunsch is able to present a convincing argument for the entire corpus of plaques to have been cast within the reigns of just two kings of the sixteenth century: Egie and Orthoghunu.

Gunsch herself insists that nothing is proven—but, then, neither is anything written by Fagg or Dark. Yet the hypotheses Gunsch presents do add up to a convincing argument that, coincidentally, largely confirms many previous ideas about the plaques. Within a thorough account of the historical and political circumstances of the time, she provides a carefully argued case that makes good sense and moves us forward in our understanding of the plaques. Gunsch also recommends that what we need now is the publication of all known plaques. I can only agree: the study of African art remains hampered by the lack of publications that systematically present all the known examples of any given form or genre. In the case of the plaques, we need photographs and descriptive accounts of their imagery that also gives attention to the kinds of detail significant in this publication. We also need metallurgical analyses for each plaque. Perhaps there is a wealthy donor “out there” who could take this on.

There is one issue Gunsch does not discuss—her book is not intended as the complete account, and something needs to be left for others to do! I refer, of course, to Fagg’s identification of individual hands. Many of the works of the “Master of the Circled Cross” are illustrated because of the way they participate in the suggested groupings of imagery. Fagg argued that this artist may have been the first of the plaque masters because of the way he deals with the problems of representing the human form without the trick of foreshortening, together with his unique background motif. (In later plaques by other artists, the foreshortening problem is dealt with by an increasing three-dimensionality.) This makes sense to me, and these plaques are part of Gunsch’s earliest group. As to the “Master of the Leopard Hunt,” not illustrated here but well-enough known (the references have already been given), there is a real sense of formal experimentation with the sideways figures of Portuguese as if in movement, appearing within yet half hidden by a synoptic view of the forest, all in very low relief. I would have anticipated finding this also in the earliest of Gunsch’s groupings, yet it is listed within the third and latest thereof where, on a formal basis, it simply does not fit! What am I to make of this? I have myself published this plaque as ca. 1500, mainly on the basis of an otherwise unpublished letter to Fagg from Kenneth...
crosthwaite murray, founder of the Nigerian Government Department of Antiquities, in which he queried fagg's hypothetical date for the casting of the first plaques: fagg always put this to ca. 1550, which would have been well after the ending of the Portuguese monopoly, but murray, with his unique knowledge of artists throughout nigeria, asked why the plaque form, with its Portuguese imagery, could not have emerged soon after their arrival in benin city. while this begs the question of where the plaque form comes from as it enters the corpus of benin city art—another matter that still needs attention—I can only agree with murray: do we have to wait for esige? perhaps he latched on to experimentation that was already in progress. and which date for his accession to the throne do we choose? the date preferred in benin city, following egharevba, is 1504; gunsch, however, following ryder, prefers 1517 (egharevba 1960: 27; onuwaue 2018: 81; ryder 1969: 50), and while, as she notes on p. 16, this makes little difference to her argument, it does have implications for our understanding of the alacrity with which benin city casters made use of new forms of visual imagery and the increased supplies of brass: the discussion continues. in the meantime, kathryn wysocki gunsch has opened up new ways of progressing our understanding of the plaque form in benin city art.

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notes
1 i use the word “bronze” specifically to refer to the alloy of copper with tin (and, as always, some lead). i realize that earlier writers (fagg, willett, et al.) used “bronze” for all copper alloys, but given what we know now of the chronological implications of the tin-bronze/zinc-brass differences in alloy composition in the lower niger region (craddock and picton 1986; peek and picton 2016), this is not helpful. if the precise alloy is not known, “copper alloy” should be the preferred designation. “bronze” and “brass” should not be used as if the two words were fully interchangeable. they are not—not any longer.
2 gunsch lists the plaques in an appendix according to their location and registration numbers, but gives no clue as to subject matter. i had to identify the master of the leopard hunt by means of its registration number as given in other publications. but i can appreciate the problem: no matter how brief, a description would have doubled the length of the list!

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book review

el anatsui: art and life by susan vogel
new york: prestel, 2012. 175 pp., 145 color ill., $60.00, hardcover

reviewed by delinda collier

el anatsui has never been tortured by the tyranny of a canvas and its definition of a grid. his bottle cap tapestries, or “metal sheets,” are normally constructed by the logic of a grid, but this grid is not weighted by the psychic and historical baggage of european modern art and architecture. his work is a new grid/medium because of anatsui’s careful calibration of how it operates as a mechanical, conceptual, and social device. anatsui understands his art to be at once mimetic, philosophical, and communicative, an aspect of african art that has been undertheorized. where western art has typically required artists to choose a mimetic function, african artists refused the choice, and that refusal is part of the luminosity of anatsui’s work.

this review is a long time coming for african arts, as susan vogel’s el anatsui: art and life was published seven years ago. i am not certain the reason for this, but i can say that for myself, el anatsui’s tapestries were so dominant in/as the field when i entered into contemporary african art history that i did not notice that it had not been reviewed in our flagship journal. in this review, i will focus my remarks on what seems to be a commonality in the literature on anatsui (even if unnotated): the play of proximity and distance. it often characterizes authors’ voices as they implicitly state the credentials to interpret the work, but also characterizes the debate over whether we should read anatsui’s work as being “african” or “global.”

overall, vogel’s comprehensive survey is an indispensable resource, both in its collection of primary statements and documents about anatsui’s biography and formal development, as well as its sumptuous collection of color and black-and-white archival images. the bibliography is comprehensive, remarkable as a history of the themes and trends in the reception of anatsui’s work. el anatsui: art and life is detailed and careful in its descriptions of anatsui’s works and presents his voice as the primary interpretive mechanism; it is surely emblematic of the friendship between vogel and anatsui, but also of anatsui’s famous generosity in sharing his process. above all, the book cherishes anatsui’s interpretation of his overall project; vogel’s is subsumed into anatsui’s work.

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el anatsui: art and life is divided into two thematic sections: “life” and “art,” which contain a total of eight chapters on various topics of the two themes. in “life,” vogel charts anatsui’s career from ghana at the kumasi school of science and technology to a teaching post at nsukka to his breakthrough on the global stage in africa remix and the stunning display of dusasa i (2007) at the 2007 venice biennale. the chapters in “life” are not rigorously organized, but instead meander more-or-less chronologically and are interspersed with important insights that sometimes appear as sidebar discussions. the “art” section focuses more closely on the different strategies that anatsui has developed over his long career that