

the interface between East and West. I recommend it highly.

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STEINER, CHRISTOPHER B. *African art in transit*. xvi, 220 pp., illus., bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1994. £35.00 (cloth), £16.95 (paper)

Having failed to find anything to complain about in Steiner's marvellously lucid book on the African art trade, I took the opportunity to interrogate a colleague, more familiar with the details of this subject than I am, as to whether s/he thought there were any faults in the book, so that I could at least provide what promised to become an embarrassingly gushing review with a fig-leaf of critical objectivity and distance. Of course, my colleague did have a quibble, something, if I have it correctly, to the effect that Steiner's field investigations could have been a bit more comprehensive and his account of the art trade in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) a bit less anecdotal in its approach. With this fig-leaf now securely in place, I may proceed to outline why I found this one of the most interesting, enjoyable and illuminating anthropological monographs I have read for some time.

Although ostensibly about the anthropology of art, this book is equally pertinent to economic anthropology, in particular the anthropology of markets, trading and consumption. Steiner describes the organization of the trade in 'African art' as it is conducted in Abidjan. He devotes three chapters to the nuts and bolts of the trade, detailing the categories of art-objects for sale, and the categories of traders involved at different phases of the transaction of art-objects as they are extracted from villages and secluded workshops, and sent on their travels, via the Abidjan market, towards metropolitan destinations. He discusses the politics of inter-ethnic relations in the marketplace, before turning his attention, in the second half of the book, to the 'quest for authenticity' which motivates collectors, and loosens their purse-strings, and which has to be pandered to, as far as possible, by African traders, who have themselves little conception as to why rich foreigners should pursue this mysterious quality so avidly. These local traders are almost all Muslims, who believe that trafficking in idols is impious, but who resort to this questionable trade out of economic necessity. Yet it is they, who, by reading signals from their foreign clients, have to create the mystique of African authenticity surrounding the works sold, which they, in turn, have obtained in lots from the itinerant traders who visit the hinterland villages where art is produced in 'raw' form. Steiner describes the way in which new types of objects may be periodically fed into the market and promoted to 'artwork'

status, usually through the self-interested intervention of expatriate dealers.

Sling-shots (the British call them catapults) have been promoted in this way, via the publication (by a dealer who had cornered the supply) of a glossy catalogue. The sling-shots in the catalogue sell for a high price, but even higher is the price the dealer can ask for a sling-shot which is *not* in the catalogue, which he can now represent as having been 'held back' because it was too rare, special, etc. House-ladders, though hardly decorative or convenient, are now artworks, and one trader, obviously taking the long view, has filled a corner of his warehouse with large wooden pestles. All it needs is for some dealer to 'discover' that pestles are important symbolic fetishes and who knows what may happen to the price.

Lastly, Steiner deals with the nature of cultural brokerage and the way in which objects are provided with contexts, or, if necessary, are altered so as to fit the context which has been prepared for them (by being artificially aged, dirtied, or altered so that carved loin-cloths are removed from figurines which Westerners think 'ought' to be naked, and so on). Needless to say, a great deal of Steiner's book is devoted to the misrepresentation of putative works of art, including the outright taking thereof. But I am glad to be able to say that Steiner shows such sympathetic understanding of the African traders' point of view that one never feels that the traders are being morally censured for what they do for a living, any more than if they were farmers or factory hands. Westerners, by contrast, come off very badly indeed, as they deserve to, since Western art dealers are as venal as art collectors are ignorant and vain. These dealers and art-addicts profusely condemn themselves out of their own mouths via aptly chosen quotations from their literary effusions. Anthropological art experts are shown up too, e.g. the blinkered remark cited from William Fagg who once described the act of faking as 'a work of the devil and a sin against art'. Exactly why the anthropology of art had made so little progress in fifty years, until the onset of the likes of Bourdieu, Clifford and Steiner himself is perfectly encapsulated here. While anthropologists were prepared to foster the basic misrecognition of 'art' as somehow confined to a sphere of pure aesthetics, the anthropology of art could gain no foothold in the practical world otherwise so minutely investigated by the anthropological gaze. Thanks to Steiner, we now have a smoking-gun account of the cultural production and transaction of 'art' which brooks no mythologizing.

But, I suspect, there will be many who think that the mysteries of art are hardly touched upon in these pages, rank with the odour of actuality. Perhaps Steiner himself owes us more of an explanation than he provides as to where he stands on the question of the value of art. As

I leaf through the illustrations of humdrum little mannikins and yawn-inducing masks with which this book is illustrated, I wonder how much of the disdain I feel has been produced by this book, or whether I always felt this way about masks and mannikins. This book is ostensibly about a traffic in low-grade art-works, purveyed by opportunistic hucksters to tourists and self-deceiving collectors, which can be fully accounted for in Bourdieu's terms as a rather precarious attempt to create and accumulate symbolic capital. Yet even though Steiner is very good at demolishing 'authenticity' in this context, one is unsure whether he might not acknowledge it elsewhere, e.g. with respect to the old and famous works of (traditional) African art which Steiner's dealers (both the African ones and the European ones) believe are confined to museum collections and unlikely ever to (re)enter the art market. Is the African art market Steiner describes paradigmatic of the artworld in a more general (Arthur Danto) sense, or is it a parody artworld entirely produced by the contradictions of the post-colonial era?

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General

ABEL, KERRY. *Drum songs: glimpses of Dene history* (McGill-Queen's Stud. ethn. Hist. 15). xx, 339 pp., illus., maps, tables, bibliogr. Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1993. £38.00 (cloth), £16.95 (paper)

This series appears to encourage ethnic history written from an insider's viewpoint or by an outsider using abundant inside information. *Drum songs* offers, as it says, glimpses into Northern Dene history, but it does so exclusively from the viewpoints of various Euro-Canadian groups who from the eighteenth century have come in contact with Dene. We hear at great length from records and letters of Hudsons Bay Company (HBC), Northern and other traders, Catholic and Protestant missionaries, trappers, resource prospectors and developers, and finally agents of the Canadian Government. The competitive conflicts among all these are highly detailed from original records taken almost entirely at face value, without much historiographic comparison and analysis. The book is based on data from outside agents of change, coming to manipulate and exploit the land, resources and Dene people. Over three centuries each group had its own aims and agenda; none attempted to understand or reflect on Dene lives and views, or hear more objectively from the Dene themselves. Naturally their reports and comments reflect the biases, ethnocentrism and selective ignorance necessary to justify attainment of their ends. The book offers no Dene oral history and tradition (which are

abundant and readily available from the Dene people), or materials from recent Dene political and news documents, or data and insights or topics of Dene philosophy and recent socio-economic and political history from well-known Dene public figures. That the Dene *en masse* are quite willing to supply such information and views is evident from the documents they have produced, and from such recent events as the great outpouring of data and suggestions regarding Dene land use and economy *vis-à-vis* proposed oil/gas exploration and pipeline construction in their territory. This was given to Justice Berger in his 1974-5 court of enquiry throughout Dene settlements of the Mackenzie River Basin, but the watershed happening was barely mentioned by Abel. In short, the most glaring omission in *Drum songs* is the informed and articulate Dene themselves.

Even if Abel lacked opportunity to interview Dene people directly, a seemingly obvious strategy for investigating twentieth-century history, she could have accessed the large and varied modern social anthropological/linguistic/archaeological literature, and could have obtained relevant data from professionals in the field. This could reduce both naivety and the number of errors – especially in technological, economic, social, linguistic, educational and religious/philosophical matters – and added reasonable, informed current theories on culture, pre-history and dating. Abundant HBC, church and government sources interestingly document Euro-Canadian items in a full but skewed bibliography. Similarly the maps and tables reflect no such data as Dene territorial and resource use and fluctuations or basic demography. They derive from Euro-Canadian business, church and government interests.

In spite of dependence upon non-Dene sources, and lack of sources and citations for her occasional statements about Dene values and patterns of behaviour, Abel manages to present several of these appropriately and with considerable accuracy, particularly in reference to modern Dene views and decision-making. The book is an interesting and needed contribution to Northwest Canadian history but does not really qualify as a history of Northern Dene people.

From a rather weak introduction and early repetitive anecdotal chapters, the work improves as it gets into more varied and full documentation of twentieth-century economic and political development, and as Dene reactions, views and stands are finally, if indirectly, documented.

Abel discusses the terrible impact of diseases, treaty making and interpretations, the questions of reserves and game preserves, trapline, game and fishing laws, resource over-exploitation after the second world war, education and health care, fraud and broken promises, and the rise and organization of Dene political consciousness