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BOOK REVIEWS

Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy.
ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON. New York: Random House, 1983.
xvii + 317 pp. (Cloth US\$ 19.95)

Within the larger context of art and aesthetics in the Americas, the contributions made by peoples of African descent have gone largely unnoticed or unappreciated by serious scholars in the fields of both anthropology and (especially) art history. For this reason, Robert Farris Thompson's recent study of Afro-American art and philosophy — a work conceived with sensitivity, and presented in provocative prose — is a welcome addition to a decidedly impoverished area of research. However, from a methodological perspective the book is, on the whole, disappointing, and fails to attain the quality and originality of the author's earlier contributions to the study of Yoruba art and culture (1974; 1976). The book's methodological and conceptual shortcomings, together with its intrepidly daring theoretical assertions, raise important questions concerning the nature of scholarship in what is inevitably a highly emotional, political, and ideologically charged area of investigation. A critical reading of *Flash of the spirit* leaves this reviewer with serious reservations about both the form and content of the work.

The purpose of the book, the author tells us, is to identify "specifically Yoruba, Kongo[,] Dahomean, Mande, and Ejjaham influences on the art and philosophies of black people throughout the Americas" (pp. xiv-xv). In so doing, he proposes to go beyond earlier works, which have "shown [only] generalized African

cultural unities linking the women and men of West and Central Africa to black people in the New World" (p. xiv). While seeking to identify specific cultural traits linking Africa to the Americas, Thompson skillfully skirts a problematic issue characteristic of the brief intellectual history of such research, namely the obvious difficulty of distilling from the multifarious societies of the sub-Saharan continent a single "African" culture. In effect, however, it would seem that the author has simply replaced Herskovits's schema of culture areas (1924) with a more fashionable concept of ethnic groups, thereby departing less radically from the contributions of a half century ago than one would have hoped for in a book that advertises itself in the jacket blurb as a "landmark of scholarship."

Flash of the spirit is comprised of five chapters, each devoted to New World manifestations of a particular African "aesthetic tradition." The first chapter deals with what Thompson refers to as Yoruba traditions in the Old and New World. Relying on his expertise in Yoruba art and culture, the author identifies similarities between the ways in which the Yoruba of West Africa reflect upon and create their art and their social world, and the ways in which certain peoples in the Americas (especially those of African descent in New York City, Miami, Havana, Matanzas, Recife, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro) conceive of and act upon things in artistic, religious, and social domains. Thompson argues that because art holds a privileged place in Yoruba society, its reaffirmation in the arts of black America is understandable and indeed to be expected. In the author's words:

... sheer artlessness may bring a culture down but a civilization like that of the Yoruba, and the Yoruba-Americans, pulsing with ceaseless creativity richly stabilized by precision and control, will safeguard the passage of its people through the storms of time [p. 97].

Though filled with tremendous appreciation and sympathetic perception for aesthetic continuities between Yoruba art of West Africa and Yoruba-looking art in the Americas, Thompson's analysis is seriously flawed by its failure to identify, or even to broach, the historical (as opposed to metaphysical) links which connect the two artforms in space and time. What he offers is a

highly thought-provoking analysis of the nature of a shared Yoruba ontology stretching across the Atlantic. What he fails to provide is the causative basis for such a connection: the *fait accompli* thus being granted more analytical weight than the processes by which Yoruba art and philosophy were "transplanted" to the New World.

The second chapter, based on one of Thompson's earlier works (1981), is an investigation of Kongo art and religion in the Americas. Here, Thompson argues that "Kongo civilization and art were not obliterated in the New World; they resurfaced in the coming together, here and there, of numerous slaves from Kongo and Angola" (p. 104). Selecting four Kongo artistic and sacred traditions — the cosmogram, *minkisi* charms, the grave, and bottle trees — Thompson identifies what he perceives to be their New World counterparts.

In this section we are also introduced to James Hampton and Henry Dorsey, two twentieth-century Afro-American artists. Thompson explores these individuals' artistic creations, focusing primarily on the Kongo traditions which seem to inform them. Again, there is no distinction made between the art and philosophies of Africa which date to the era of the Atlantic slave trade — the material which, according to Thompson's argument, would have formed part and parcel of the cultural baggage transported by African men and women to the New World — and the art and philosophies of contemporary Africa. He writes, for instance,

Like the spectral pulleys, wheels, and switches on a modern Kongo drum, he [Henry Dorsey] brought together a liquor jug, the blades of an electric fan, and a metal disk to form a material constellation of objects ... [pp. 147-50].

What links these two forms of aesthetic expression is left unclear to the reader, save perhaps their being joined by the "flash of the spirit" — that visual and philosophic stream of creativity and imagination which somehow traverses the Atlantic owing no allegiance to boundaries of space and time.

Haitian *vodun*, the topic of the third chapter, is described by Thompson as "a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Kongo with an infusion

of Roman Catholicism" (p. 163). Here, in a sense, Thompson is more sensitive than elsewhere in the book to what he terms the "reblending," or what Mintz and Price (1976) — using a technical linguistic analogy — have called the "remodelling," of various African and European cultures which were brought together in the New World. Yet, hidden behind this apparent openness to an acceptance of the complexity of cultural heritage there lies a curious insistence on dissecting the product of such synthesis, in this case *vodun*, into its putatively separate, distinct roots. Hence, we find that the chapter is divided into sections labeled "Dahomean Influences on Haitian Sacred Art" and "Kongo Influences on Haitian Sacred Art." Here again, this reviewer finds little or no departure from Herskovits's work on the subject published in the 1930s. This is a pity, for what was seminal scholarship fifty years ago appears today, in light of recent research (e.g., Lowenthal 1978), to be an unwarrantable retention of the errors of less adequate theories.

The final two chapters of the book are related to one another by the attention paid to the arts of adornment. Chapter Five is an exploration of Ejagham influences on the iconography of Afro-Cuban symbolic expression as represented in designs on cloth and clothing. Great attention is given to the Ejagham feathered calabash because the "structure of these plumes is special to the Ejagham, hence unmistakable when they reemerge in Cuba to attain full and lasting value" (p. 236). The penultimate chapter, "Round Houses and Rhythimized Textiles," examines the influence of certain African stylistic traditions in architecture and weaving on specific Afro-American arts in the New World. This chapter deserves detailed analysis, for it poses some of the most serious methodological problems in the book.

Thompson's analysis of Afro-American textiles posits a Mande influence which finds echoes in the rhythms of melodic accents in both African and Afro-American music. His phrasing of the aesthetic principles which inform Mande and so-called Mande-influenced textiles in terms which are suggestive of a musical paradigm is a fascinating and important contribution to our understanding of the aesthetics of narrow-strip cloth. The paradigm, however, fails to help us grasp adequately the continuities which, Thompson argues, stretch across the Atlantic.

Here, as elsewhere, Thompson suggests that Afro-Americans recaptured in their art the "flavor of the [African] past" which was trampled by the experience of slavery, and physically altered by a new environment (in this case the loss of the narrow-band loom). The crux of his argument centers on the resemblance of Mande "country cloths" (narrow-strip textiles sewn together in such a way as to form a pattern characterized by the juxtaposition of different colored strips) and textiles produced by the Saramaka and Djuka Maroons of Suriname (cloths made by sewing together strips of multicolored commercially-made fabrics). Thompson insists that Suriname textiles are Mande-influenced expressions of a deeply-rooted African past.

Though relying extensively, for his information about Mande textiles, on what is surely one of the finest works written on the subject (Lamb 1975), Thompson completely disregards, for his information on Suriname textiles, the work of Sally and Richard Price (1980) which, like Lamb's study, is based on extensive fieldwork and historical research. This is clearly a sin of omission, but almost certainly not an involuntary oversight; for the Prices' findings plainly contradict Thompson's theory of Africanisms directly transplanted to the New World, and the inclusion of their material would surely weaken his argument, pointing instead toward a more nuanced approach to Afro-American art history. The Prices introduce their detailed discussion by noting that

Maroon narrow-strip textiles . . . are strikingly similar to woven narrow-strip cloths from West Africa . . . Once we realize, however, that Maroon narrow-strip sewing began only during this century, it becomes clear that this art could not have been passed down, generation by generation, from African origins, and we are forced to consider other — more subtle and less readily documentable — processes of historical influence [1980: 72-73].

Thompson, choosing not even to cite the Prices' historical research, suggests instead:

Variables of Mande and Mande-related cloth-making remain indelibly intact in these Mande, West African-influenced regions of the New World. The recombination of these variables to form novel creole art — also embodying European influences — is an autonomous development in the history of Afro-American visual creativity, especially in Suriname. *Nevertheless*, the vibrant visual attack and timing of these cloths are unthinkable except in terms of

partial descent from Maude cloth, a world of metrically sparkling textiles [p. 208; emphasis mine].

A critical reading of Thompson's book raises serious issues for students of Afro-American art and culture. What is at stake here is not merely a pedantic argument over the "true" provenance of Afro-American artistic styles and sources of inspiration. What is being called into question is a more fundamental problem, namely the nature and the use of evidence in art historical and anthropological research in areas of African and Afro-American art. For indeed, the shortcomings in Thompson's work force us to consider whether it is sufficient or even acceptable to employ a methodology in which theory determines the use of evidence rather than one in which each informs the other. Is it sufficient merely to extrapolate evidence backwards in time, assuming that similarities in the present are, perforce, echoes of the past? Or, rather, is it more reasonable to proceed slowly from the evidence of the past to the conditions of the present?

To be sure, each approach has its drawback. Whereas the former risks painting a history of Afro-American art with brushstrokes far too bold, the latter runs the chance of drawing a portrait so unfinished and incomplete that its image may not immediately be recognizable. However, in the final analysis, the second approach, though perhaps more painstaking, provides us with the empirical knowledge necessary to understand Afro-American art in ways far more profound. By avoiding the presumption of positioning the art along an unbroken arc of meta-physical continuities, the approach seeks to uncover the art's place and meaning in an historical context, thereby posing more directly questions concerning what it is that makes it culturally distinct and, as it were, Afro-American in the fullest sense of the word.

What Thompson has offered us in *Flash of the spirit* is a celebration of Afro-American arts — a celebration which, for all its genuine sensitivity and excitement, approaches the notion of historical evidence in a strictly impressionistic way. One can only hope that future works, inspired by the sense of dignity and animation with which Thompson imbues the arts of black America, take more seriously the schism between intuitive feeling

and historical knowing, thereby embarking on a rational, objective study of Afro-American art which seeks to reconcile what E. H. Gombrich (1979) appropriately called "the demands of the heart with those of the head."

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