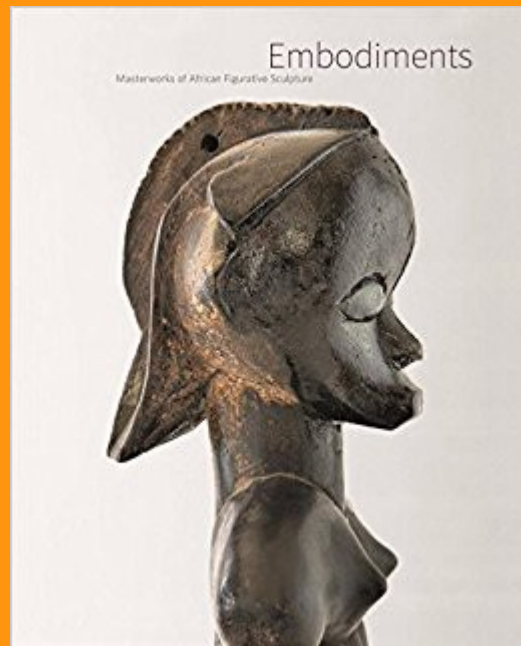


IZIBONGO

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THE GIFTS of TIME

a revised review of *Embodiments: Masterworks of African Figurative Sculpture*
from the Richard H. Scheller Collection
edited by Christina Hellmich and Manuel Jordan

Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

You know as I do dear reader, that its always the sweetest of pleasures, to take time with a great book: and so it was with this one. It is published by Prestel Publishing, who also gave us African Textiles: The Karun Thakar Collection.

I am happy to present to you, *The Gifts of Time*.

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Amadeo and the Baule©Natty Mark Samuels, 2017.



Early 20th Century
Democratic Republic of the Congo
from *Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*

<https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2018/01/izibongo-magazine-2018.html>

<http://rastaites.com/izibongo-issues-64-71/>



Richard H. Scheller

from SFGate



Christina Hellmich

from UCSU HAVC Department



Maternity Figure

Late 19th/Early 20th Century
Democratic Republic of the Congo
from *de Young Museum*

THE GIFTS of TIME

Isn't it good to know that when time goes, it leaves us with certain things; sometimes beautiful, sometimes necessary – or a combination of both. So it is with this 19th century Luba figure; beauty from a piece of tree; necessity of use in initiation and healing. If ever you see or buy a copy of *Embodiments: Masterworks of African Figurative Sculpture*, go straight to page 217, to see Plate 88 and see that time has left us something special from the Congo.

In the Cambridge Dictionary, under the heading Embodiment, it says '*someone or something that represents a quality or an idea exactly*'. And that's what the chosen work in this book represents: ideas. Ideas of protection, healing, fertility and communal well being. The communities were built on those ideas; their ancient manual of belief.

The Bisa fisherman in Zambia, heading out into the wetlands, felt more assured, as he knew that the master carver had created a representation of the guardian spirit; and there it is on the riverside, watching over him as he goes out. Or the Kota Obama of Gabon and their reliquary figure – custodian of the relics of the community. This is one of the most stunning of the pieces; a face of wood, with striated patterning, circular eyes of bone; large ear-like features of copper alloy and a crescent head dress of the same metal mix, both patterned geometrically.

Going into Burkina Faso, it was interesting to read that the scarification on the chest of the Bwa figure, '*represent the path of the ancestors. Because the ancestors were successful and prosperous, their descendants are expected to make every effort to follow the same path throughout their lives. It is easy to stray from the path, which is why it is depicted as a zizzag line.*' Staying in Burkino Faso, moving on to the Mossi people, there's a sculpture representing a well-respected senior women, a '*living ancestress*'. The larger photo shows her in rear view side profile, with her full breasts, body scarification and solitary plait hanging at the back. It's a celebration of the older woman, back in her younger days.

Amongst the Bullum in Sierre Leone, there is a female statute, that is held during divination. I don't what wood was used, but there's a glow to the darkness of it, whose sheen may have been enhanced by the anointing with oil. A very attractive piece; four rings around her neck, a smile on her face and a head of plaits that seem like a crown. Now we've mentioned plaits for the second time, lets talk hair for a moment or two of hair. In present day Europe, hair is more a group, fashion or ethnic identification, but in pre-colonial Africa – or at least some of the sub-Saharan regions – hair was a status symbol, something of prestige, amongst peoples such as the Guro of Ivory Coast and the Ndengese of the Congo. These were those with more time on their hands; hands that did not know the tear and scar of fieldwork. .

These sculptures came in all shapes and sizes; some heads, some full body; free-standing, or on some kind of pedestal; of pure wood, or with additions. Additions such as the fibre on the Bete figure, Ivory Coast; hide, on the Mangbetu harp, northern Congo; metal, glass and fibre, on the southern Congolese Luba figure, of the first paragraph.

Now we come to another of my personal favourites, Plate 18, a Baule figure. An elder, he looks like one that you would go to for advice, or just to be in his presence. A slender

figure, with two big plaits in his hair, one hand touching his long plaited beard. It would have pride of place on the mantelpiece. When you look at Baule artistry, this or any other, you can see why Modigliani went to the Trocadero - and why thirty years later, the African American Norman Lewis, went to MoMa: they went to draw the gems of the Baule. I sometimes wonder how Modern Art would have looked, if Picasso and others, hadn't encountered Africa, in the Trocadero and curio shops of Paris. So, before we enter Nigeria, let's pause for a little while, especially for those not aware of the African influence on Modern Art; here's a piece of writing, celebrating what the Baule have given us. Entitled *Amadeo and the Baule...*

Narrator: I see you Amadeo, walking towards another rendezvous with Africa. Sleep came intermittent last night in that abandoned building, after the latest in a series of evictions. But corduroy-trousered, you slow-step towards that building, which is clothed in the grandiose. Your head, heavy as cobble stones, burdened by last night's indulgences, you step into the road - almost hit by a car: the top-hatted driver curses you and moves on. You stand there for a few moments, senses frayed, a little lost, while the world passes by; women in big dresses with parasols; dark-suited men, bowler-hatted. Then you move on, as voices call you...

Voices: After the rough sleeping,
Overload of weed and booze;
Come, take some respite
With your African Muse.
Yes Amadeo,
Come to the Trocadero.

Narrator: As you enter the building of destination, a little token of peace embraces you. A site of the ancient talisman and of recent dust. You immediately make your way to the place of those who called you there, greeting the attendants who know you now. On the way, you bump into Pablo Picasso who is on his way out. Eager to draw and he late for an appointment, you wish each other well, saying you may meet later in the Cafe de la Rotunde or at Le Select. Amongst the plinths and the glass casing, you are where you want to be: the place of the Baule. Are their gold pendants there? In my opinion, no one made them better than the Baule. What about doors? When we think of carved doors, we think of the Edo of Benin, but the Baule of the Ivory Coast were skilled in door carving also.

Voices: Yes, we gave thanks to the tree
Before cutting it down.
An offering to the Sese,
The tree of wide renown.
Do they have mbotombo,
Here in Trocadero?

Narrator: Sometimes you come with Constantin Brancusi, where is he today? Your supportive friend and neighbour. After time in Rue Caulaincourt, Montmartre, time for re-location to Cite Falguiere, Montparnesse: the other side of the Seine. I see you and Brancusi buzzing, after leaving the Joseph Brummer Gallery on Boulevard Raspail, another venue exhibiting African art. You, an Italian, leave the venue of the Hungarian, walking alongside a Romanian, on a Parisian street. Chatting, animated, along the Boulevard du Montparnesse, to enjoy some crepes at Cafe le Dome. Mesmerised again by the Baule creativity, you begin to draw. The oval face, elongated nose, almond eyes and the minuscule mouth. Away from all the temptations and distractions and the noise of the street, your head begins to clear, as once again, you allow yourself to be transported to West Africa.

Voices: We are the Baule,
From the group called Akan.
We migrated from Ghana,
Queen Aura's plan.
Will you sketch kolo,
While cocooned in Trocodero?

Narrator: You know all the cafes in the Carrefour Vavin. Those already mentioned, as well as the La Coupole and La Closerie de Lilas; the wines and sawdust of Cafe de la Rotonde. From the apartments of cheap rent, to the cafes of patient proprietors. The places where you engaged your models, where you sketched for sustenance. Places of warmth and debate, of affordable coffee and the planning of this and that. Evenings with Moise Kisling, early mornings with Chaim Soutine; time and days with Max Jacob and Jacques Lipschitz.

Time with the lover, when rain can't stop play. Sheltered under an umbrella, I see you and her, snuggled against each other on a bench in the Jardin de Luxembourg, while the rest of Paris dashes to work, home or the places of study and shopping. The rest of humanity doesn't matter right now, neither does the rain.

Voices: Many come to gawp,
At what they term primitive.
But you saw a piece of our souls,
Recognised what we had to give.
More than just a curio,
You payed homage in Trocodero.

Narrator: You're blessed to have had the support of Paul Alexandre - who often accompanied you to the Trocodero - and the present support of Paul Guillaume, both of whom have helped to keep your head above water. I make special mention of the latter, a truly trail blazing figure in the exhibiting of African Art. I hope that one day, France honours this largely forgotten pioneer.

Voices: Come Amadeo,
Lover of our creativity.
As you sing of the Baule,
We shall chant Modigliani.
Do they have the mask mblo,
On display in Trocodero?

Narrator: Brancusi suggested you sculpt – and so you began. Without training in the genre, you became a man on a mission. I see you with your new companion named wheelbarrow. You and he became frequenters of building sites, ferrying the limestone back to its place of transformation. I love the thought that in the evening, those regal heads you sculpt, are lit by candlelight. Remember hearing that Jacob Epstein, was impressed with the work - and how it was displayed in the studio you shared with Brancusi. A shrine to art: homage to the Baule.

Voices: Go easy tonight Amadeo,
With the absinthe and the wine.
Heard that TB's got you,
Walking it's tightrope line.
We bid farewell as you go:
Until tomorrow in Trocodero.

Narrator: Feeling better, after the morning's drawing, as you exit the Musee d'Ethnographie du Trocodero, you scan the 16th aggrondissement. The Eiffel Tower in the distance, the street sweeper woman nearby. The pedestrians, the cars, horse and carts, buses, policeman here and there, the man pulling a cart of produce. The strollers and the workers. Glad for time away from the hustle and bustle, you seem ready to re-engage. Smiling, you walk in the direction of Montparnasse: an artist ready to create.

The next time you go to the net, treat yourself; google Baule gold pendants and go to images: to see them is better than energy drinks, for the worn eyes and the tired mind.

The Afo maternity figure of Nigeria, must be amongst the best of the mother and child depictions you'll ever see. Seated, she has a face of authority, like one ready to do her duty. Body and face of scarification; a neck of rings and a smaller one in her right ear. A baby suckles at her left breast, an older baby climbs on her back. The text says that '*As a shrine figure, it may have represented a nature deity or perhaps an ancestor, and spirits such as these were responsible for the overall health and prosperity of the people*'...

There's a mask by the Bamun of Cameroon, that when I turned the page and saw it, Dizzy Gillespie came to mind, because of the big cheeks on the face. So I thought it must be connected with fertility or a thanksgiving ceremony. Referring to the text, it said '*This object would have been worn as a head dress by a dancer who with many others, took part in the annual parade for the harvest festival (nja)*'.

South of Cameroon, in Gabon, we encounter a Fang ancestral figure: a custodian of the relics. Everyone wanted a Fang, including Richard H. Scheller, whose collection this book is based on. I say everyone, because those I call the African Quartet – Paul Guillaume, Charles Ratton, Helena Rubinstein and Jacob Epstein – all at one time owned at least one Fang.

Staying in Gabon, I like the back door of the Mbeté reliquary figure, where pieces of the ancestral bones were kept. The custodian mannequin of cane and cotton, from the Bembe of the Congo, his arm outstretched in oath. Healing figure by the Vili of the Congo, with her humble expression and almond eyes of sacred white clay. It was a Vili figure purchased by Matisse, that Picasso saw in the house of Gertrude Stein in 1906, that set him on the road to African art, then further on to Cubism.

From the master painter to the master printmaker. Knowing that the pioneering Nigerian printmaker Bruce Onobrakpeya likes to use motifs and emblems from his Urhobo culture, I wonder if the Ivri sculpture and altars, have entered his creativity.

From the master printmaker to the master sculptor. It must have been something to have been a Yaka man in the Congo when the chief conferred on you the title *kimbumbu* – master carver. An honour to be the one chosen to make the necessities of life; for individual protection and for communal well-being.

Staying in the Congo, it was interesting to find out bits about the Suku culture; for instance, they believe '*the left side of the body is associated with feminine aspects*'. Also, '*The quadruped on the figure's head, which also appears on Suku masks, is the duiker trickster of many folktales, proverbs and hunting adventures...*'. I knew of the spider Ananse of Asante tales and the tortoise Ajapa of the Yoruba stories, but I'd never heard of an antelope trickster.

The Ibangala, whom we think of as a martial entity, were both allies and enemies of legendary Queen Nzinga, but they also seemed to have been sceptre specialists. The one displayed in the book is of a youthful, smiling face, with big eyes; a great headdress, that reminds me of Pharaonic Egypt. Another great headwear, also from Angola, is that of the royal figure, playing a thumb piano called *chisanje* (that we associate more with Zimbabwe - the mbira). The whole sculpture, including the head wear, recalls that now classic figure of the Chokwe culture hero, Chibunda Ilunga.

Another favourite of mine is the Luluwa figure of the Congo, in a squatting position. Is he tired? Restless? Thinking, reflecting? It reminds me of the wood cut by the Namibian artist, John Muafangejo, entitled '*Thinking Man*'.

Thinking about the Kuba - another Congo people - and their profusion of creativity; if an item wasn't nailed down, it got beaded or carved! So it is with the wonderfully carved palm wine cup, in the shape of a head. Its reddish tone may be due to the use of tukula, a paste made from camwood bark powder and palm oil, used as a moisturiser, dye, paint, currency and gifts (in block form).

Another Congolese people featured are the Kalanga, in a piggyback offering. The rider has a long thick plait at the back; the carrier stands on a pedestal. Works such as these are meant to portray those who are ferried this way, such as chiefs, initiates and brides.

The next two figures are also Congo residents; Holoholo and Songola. Both are depicted with serene visages; the former is of dark wood, the latter a reddish brown. But they both have something in common; under the turban-like bundle of the Holoholo woman, the rasta look headwear of the Songola one, they carry the herbs of solace and remedy.

The book concluded with a chapter on conservation science. The use of computerised tomography scans, as well as radiography. Just like they're trying to conserve the medieval manuscripts of Mali, Mauretania and Nigeria, the collectors of African art are trying to preserve their gems also. We find out that Richard H. Scheller as well as being a dedicated collector of African art, is also a biochemist, an expert on DNA: perfect!

I give thanks for what has been given to us, deposited in the collection box of humanity: the gifts of time. I give thanks also for those dedicated in their efforts, to document those gifts; Richard H. Scheller, the collector; Christina Hellmich and Manuel Jordan, the editors; Robert A. Kato, the photographer – and to the contributors of the invaluable text.

Let me leave the last words to the collector...

"Clearly, all cultures possess aesthetic genius and by studying the art of others, perhaps we will understand a bit more about ourselves....in the meantime, let's enjoy these wonderful creations.

Natty Mark Samuels



Male and Female Divination figures

19th Century
Ivory Coast
from *de Young Museum*