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Baule: African Art, Western Eyes

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Book Reviews and Notes

Baule: African Art, Western Eyes.

Susan Mullin Vogel. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997. 312 pp., plates, glossary, exhibition checklist, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper).

This volume presents an extremely complete picture of the Baule people of the central Ivory Coast and their material culture. Richly illustrated (it is an exhibition catalogue) and well-documented, Vogel's analysis attempts to present Baule art from the "author's" view point, using quotations from Baule individuals to argue that the Baule do not think of the beautiful objects that they create in the same way that we do in the West. She states that the Baule, like the Igbo, appear to feel that the process of art is more important than the product (p. 292). However, the Baule admit to the presence of beautiful objects in their lives, and that these objects are special because of their power to affect lives in various ways.

Beginning with an introduction to the Baule and her involvement with them, Vogel divides the text into eight chapters in two parts. The first four chapters discuss the Western approach to Baule art, the Baule world, art in the Baule world, and Baule attitudes toward art and looking at it. Chapter One, "Baule Art: The View from the West," discusses the form and style of Baule art in conventional Western terms. In the second chapter, "The Baule World," a structuralist/functionalist discussion of the moieties of male/female, human/spirit, and village/wilderness is presented, although some of the "fuzzy" areas between these dichotomies are explored, such as masquerade performances that blur the distinction between male and female.). The sculptures that the West classifies as art are revealed as devices for regulating relationships between the human and spirit worlds. In "Art and the Baule," Vogel approaches the difficult question of meaning: if the Baule don't think of these objects the same way Westerners do, then how do the Baule consider them? She introduces the notion that sculptural objects (art) are "resonant" objects important in other ways than for their beauty. They are physical manifestations of spirit powers which are very real and intensely felt by the Baule.

The second part of the book is organized according to the different ways of "seeing" in Baule terms. Thus, the last four chapters discuss Baule art from the point of view of visibility and seeing: prolonged looking (watching of performance arts), avoidance of looking (sacred arts), glimpsing (private or personal arts), and everyday availability (profane or everyday arts. Chapter Four, "Art, Darkness and Visual Memory," is based on Vogel's recent interviews regarding meanings of art according to the Baule. The focus shifts from a positivistic search for meaning in Western terms, to a reflexive search for multiple meanings based in multiple contexts. The power of objects and of sight are discussed in Baule terms. Chapters Five through Eight continue the reflexive approach introduced here. Different categories of Baule art, organized according to degrees of visibility: public performance art (Mblo and Goli masquerades) in Chapter Five; art that is "seen without looking," or sacred art for family shrines, men's masquerades, the women's special dance and equipment belonging to trance diviners in Chapter Six; private art ("art that is glimpsed") in Chapter Seven; and art that is visible in everyday life ("Art That is Visible to All: The Profane") in Chapter Eight. Divination vessels, weaver's paraphernalia, carved stools and

chairs, drums, spoons, miniature bronze objects for measuring and storing gold, decorated pottery, combs, slingshots, doors, and shutters all fall into this category.

While, as an archaeologist, one could have wished for more discussion of ceramics, this is a minor quibble in the context of the wealth of material considered and the multiple contexts of meaning explored in this volume.