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For Hearth and Altar: African Ceramics from the Keith Achepohl Collection

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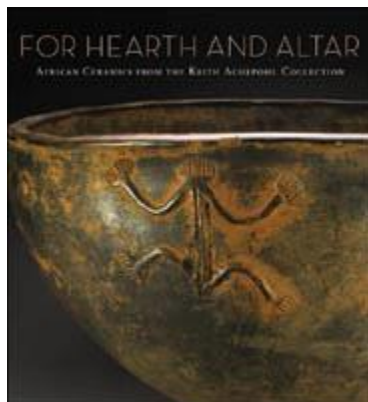
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Kathleen Bickford Berzock. *For Hearth and Altar: African Ceramics from the Keith Achepohl Collection.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. 203 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-300-1149-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 0-86559-221-7.

Reviewed for H-AfrArts by Susan Cooksey, Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida.

Presence and Prominence: Foregrounding African Ceramics

For Hearth and Altar accompanied an exhibition curated by the author, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, which opened at the Chicago Art Institute in 2005. This publication, with its substantive but accessible text and beautiful illustrations, was written for general readers, yet it will appeal to scholars as well. The book begins with a transcription of Berzock's interview with collector Keith Achepohl, a printmaker and professor emeritus of printmaking at the University of Iowa. Berzock's interview with Achepohl reveals the collector's passion for African ceramics as one informed and enhanced by his artist's eye. "Ceramics in Africa," an introductory essay by Berzock, follows with a discussion of the ancient traditions of ceramic production, and overviews of techniques, aesthetics, and interpretation. Within these overviews, the author elaborates on the relationship of ceramics to metallurgy, the refinement and continuity of techniques, the secular and sacred roles of ceramic vessels, and the pervasive metaphor of pot as body in various African ceramic traditions. She connects these themes to examples in the Achepohl collection featured in the catalogue as well as to other examples from the continent. Illustrations in this chapter focus on methods of production, and include several large color photographs of various stages of ceramic production, a photograph of a Yoruba Shango shrine, and a map of the continent.

The eight chapters that follow are organized according to geographic regions with the headings of "Ancient Civilizations of the Niger Bend," "Berber North Africa," "West Africa: Sahel and Savanna," "West Africa: Forest and Coast," "Eastern Nigeria and Cameroon," "Central Africa," and "Eastern and Southern Africa." Each chapter includes an introductory essay, a map, and short essays for each object selected from the Achepohl collection. These essays provide not only a compilation of data, but also new insight into ethnography, production, function, historical context, and interpretation by drawing on published literature and recent communications with scholars in the field. The inclusion of copious endnotes and extensive bibliography testify to the author's depth of research. Chapters that discuss large groups of related works, such as those of the Inland Niger

Delta, Baatonu, Gur speakers, Nupe, and Zulu, are the most successful in illustrating the wealth of stylistic variations and cross-cultural influences present in African ceramics. Only the chapter on Berber North Africa, with a mere four objects illustrated, has too few comparative examples to make this point effectively. Each of the 125 works featured is illustrated with a color plate (some also have additional detail shots) that allows close inspection of fine surface details, such as incised marks and subtle variations in coloration, coatings, and patina. The use of neutral gray or black backgrounds allows full appreciation of the ceramicist's sensitivity to form, texture, and color.

The components of the book discussed thus far -- interview, introduction, and entries -- suffice as expected features for a single collection catalogue. However, there are also six sets of interleaves between chapters that are an innovative feature of content and design. The interleaves are distinguished from the other text by varied hues of terracotta. Each interleaf focuses on a specific contextual theme, presented as a visual essay, with large field photographs that have extended captions. Thematic titles are "Pottery and the Home," "Granaries and Grain Containers," "Pottery and the Body," "The Potter's Art," "Engaging the World Beyond," and "Beer and Palm Wine." At first glance, this choice of themes may appear arbitrary and incomplete. The placement of the interleaves seems random, in that they do not form a transition between the chapters that flank them. Apparently, they were designed to provide an alternative to the standard catalogue format and, more important, to dispel any sense of cultural compartmentalization suggested by the geographically organized chapters. In the interleaves, commonalities of ceramic arts on the continent are emphasized by juxtaposing diverse examples. For example, the interleaf "Pottery and the Body" includes a photograph of a Yungur girl with elaborate abdominal scarification, with a caption stating that "throughout Africa the patterns that embellish pots are part of a wider aesthetic and symbolic system that also frequently includes marks on the body," and then discusses markings on women's bodies in the Ga'anda Hills of northeastern Nigeria that may also be seen on Ga'anda containers, such as the one in the catalogue (pp. 90). Other images featured in "Pottery and the Body" include a close-up of a Luba woman's coiffure from the 1930s, a Berber woman with facial tattoos, a Vodun shrine with a figural pot, and a Senufo woman carrying a water jar. Each illustrates a parallel to a work in the catalogue.

While some ideas presented in the interleaves are also discussed in the essays, the interleaves reinforce and enhance their relevance. Throughout the interleaves, photographs of potters at work and people using ceramic containers in food preparation, for storage, and in sacred spaces emphasize the pervasive presence and vitality of ceramics in contemporary African life. Clearly, the interleaves provide contextual information that complements and broadens the scope of the book beyond a standard catalogue or survey. However, including contextual images next to objects illustrated in the catalogue would have been helpful in several instances.

The profusion of African ceramics and lack of cohesive scholarship poses a challenge that is reflected in the few surveys that have been published. None of those attempted (i.e., Nigel Barley, *Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa* [1994]; Arnulf Stossel, Bernard Fagg, and Maria Kecskesi, *Afrikanische Keramik: traditionelle Handwerkskunst sudlich der*

***Sahara* [1984]; and Karl Ferdinand Schadler, *Keramik aus Schwarz Afrika und Alt Amerika: die Sammlung Hans Wolf* [1985]) could claim to have the combination of consistently high-quality images with the scope and depth of analysis of objects and ideas presented in *For Hearth and Altar*. This is an engaging, thoughtful, and aesthetically enticing publication that will have enduring value as a resource for study of African ceramics.**

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