



1980

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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, R. P. (1980). Thompson: African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White. *6* (2), 77-82. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol6/iss2/6>

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Thompson: African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine
Coryton White

Reviews and Discussion

Robert Farris Thompson. *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White.* Published under the sponsorship of the UCLA Art Council by the University of California Press, 1974. \$30.00 (cloth). \$14.95 (paper). \$95 (dance videotape available from publisher; 16 mins., b&w).

Review Essay by Robert Plant Armstrong
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In the decades prior to 1970, the more optimistic students anticipated that the enlarging scope of anthropological study might yield such significant address to the study of the aesthetic that at long last we might approach basic insight into the nature of that universal human phenomenon which so often serves to unite man with the gods, which has for millennia been one of the chief prizes of war, whose international exchange has given rise to touchy questions of polity, and whose illicit trade alone ranks it second only to traffic in drugs in economic value. Alas, we were to be disappointed. The proper questions were never asked, and from the point of view of the aesthetic as a distinctive human phenomenon, reports were dutiful, unrevealing, and negligible. This is not to say there were no important studies—models, indeed, of careful ethnographic, structural-functional examinations of “works of art.” But the methods of their examination were little (if, indeed, at all) different from those employed in the study of the basest objects of material culture or the simplest items in the social inventory. To those of us who had hoped for more from the study of man, it stood to reason that if an ancestor figure be in some significant respect (let us say other than in its mere shape) different from a hoe or an act of barter, then the methods directed toward its study must be devised upon the character of such differences. To study the work as but an object is to subject it to materialistic reduction, and to inquire into nothing but the social roles and functions of piece or maker is a sociological reduction. There was also some tendency to see the work as a mere substitute for thought or communication, or else to treat it as a kind of peg from which beliefs might be strung. Even the most sympathetic of us held that the work of art was everywhere and at all times the same, which is to say involved somehow with beauty, truth, virtue, rhythm, and other virtuosities. Thus was it presumed, with conspicuous naïveté, that the field informant could readily sort out aesthetic subtleties and complexities which have baffled several centuries of Western, and several more of Eastern, philosophers. This, I suppose, might be called the ethnographic reduction.

So it is that at no time during the optimistic fifties and the pretentious sixties did we come close to understanding what the work *is* in human experience—what its on-

tology might be discerned to be, what its relationship to perception is, how it holds value, or even what light might be shed upon this most undisclosed of human phenomena by virtue of man's membership in the biological orders. Thus irrespective of the contributions to our understanding of Homo sapiens the study of anthropology had made along social, economic, linguistic, and other dimensions, as far as art was concerned, anthropology might as well not have existed. It made a negligible contribution to our understanding of the aesthetic in human affairs. Inquiry was inadequate because models were inadequate. In the seventies it was finally seen that the work of art is to be approached as that sort of state of affairs that is more nearly like a person—a subject—than an object, and that, accordingly, its appropriate and distinctive study must proceed after psychological rather than physical, social, communicational, or merely structural models. The work of art is a configuration of being conscious of the world and/or the self within it. The aesthetic (because unlike agriculture, for instance, or politics it exists inextricable from one's consciousness of it) can be studied in its own and appropriate terms only if we turn our attention to the psyche, recognizing that the work is a *vital* formulation.

The studies which hold promise in this regard are but few and tentative, deriving from a few older academicians and, encouragingly, from a few young scholars still in or relatively recently emerged from graduate studies. So I cannot mean to suggest an upwelling of inspired thought which resolves age-old questions into simple and exciting clarities. Skinny pedantries and reductivistic obscurities continue to hold the day, and tender shoots of fresh thought must struggle if they are to rise through thickets of orthodoxies into the sunlight where they might flourish. Thus, anthropologists notwithstanding, it would appear, we are approaching an anthropology of art. James W. Fernandez, of Princeton, is an anthropologist; although my title is in anthropology, I teach in a program of aesthetic studies. But mostly these few workers come from more humanistic inquiry: David Wilson, of the University of California at Davis, is in American studies, as is Charles Keil, of the State University of New York at Buffalo; Henry Glassie, of the University of Pennsylvania, is in folklore studies, as is John Vlach, of the University of Texas, Austin.

Certainly Robert Farris Thompson, of the Department of the History of Art at Yale, ranks very high among these pioneers. His book-catalog *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, indeed, must be placed in an eminent position among the works of a defining genre whose distinguishing characteristic is neither mere description nor simple exegesis (the explanation of a cultural datum by referring it to its cultural context) but rather hermeneutic: the revelation of the true character of a human act brought about by showing how it is lit from within, revealing existential radiances in which the work abides as a cultural and human phenomenon. Working with the excellent collec-

tion of Katherine Coryton White (whose brief poetic note touching upon the theme of "Africa as a verb" reveals her to be a sympathetic and discerning collector), Professor Thompson, in the phrase of Walt Whitman, unleashes "aching, pent-up" energies so that, even if only by ever so little (for we have so far to go), he might cause some of the works in her collection to *stand* forth as culturally specific acts of being, acts ever in the processes of their culturally specific enactments: as flexions flexing, and as postures being held, according to the transcendent time of art. He achieves this remarkable illumination by way of wide and deep learning, and through a remarkable sensitivity employed always in the service of expanding our appropriate perception-in-experience of the work. He has learned—as Katherine White has also learned—that the African piece is not static, not merely a visual piece, but kinetic—a perpetual and perpetuating volumetric (in sculpture) configuration of the very processes of culturally enacting perceptions and values of being conscious-of. In such a view of the work, there is no informant as satisfactory as the work itself.

Professor Thompson begins his work in intellectual irony. His hidden premise is that truism at which many observers stop: the commonplace intelligence that when we transfer an African mask from the vital context of its own culture to the very different one of our own, removing it from the ecstasies of dance to the placidities of museum walls, we fail to "see" the mask as it was intended to be seen, which is to say, *in movement*. Thompson, however, sees that just so much and no more, while pointing us in the proper direction, merely brushes the real truth, namely, that there is a far more important sense in which African art is to be seen *sub specie* motion. So he sees that the cliché, rather than orienting us toward the critical aesthetic problem concerning the "reality" of the work of African sculpture, vulgarizes it by shifting the locus of the problem from the metaphysical and the existential to the merely visual (an ethnocentric fault, for in so doing we presume it to be the essence of the work).

Now it is self-evident that the various visual properties of the mask are not to be seen "properly" at rest. One thinks, for instance, of the gelede mask of the Yoruba, wall-mounted at fashionable eye level. From this perspective, the prognathic foreshortening of the mask, which, when one peers down upon the witness, achieves a visual believability, is lost when the mask is at the same level as the witness. (I must also note in passing a point I have not previously had the opportunity to make—an enactment in the subtler sense of *movement* to which we shall shortly come: namely, that those who so narrowly construe motion fail to see in this low placement of the facial features a more general African plastic motif. One observes this placement also among both the Ashanti—the akwaba—and the Mende—the Bundu helmet mask. In fact, this is an enactment of an infantile physiognomy, and therewith of a dynamic expressing the estate of being babe-like, essential in works creating the estate of

being desirous of babies or of their well-being.) The trouble with a cliché is not that it is well known and so perhaps tiresome but rather that under its compelling comfort we are deceived, thereby forfeiting richer understanding. Thus if we stopped to consider motion as no more than dancing the mask, we would miss profounder enacted states.

Thus Professor Thompson, transcending the obvious, is challenged to ascertain in what ways the motion of the African work might be subtler than, different from, and even more critical to appropriate encounter than our habitual perceptions of it might reveal. In this sense, the cover illustration of a cloth-radiating egungun dancer is most appropriate, establishing as it does the self-evident as point of departure, for it is perfectly clear that motion delivers the cloth panels into a vitality they could not have in a museum case. (Indeed, it is interesting to speculate in passing whether the general failure of the museum as an African institution—from small support, pilferage, decay—is not in some measure due to the fact that Western techniques and concepts used by the curators tend to rob the works of their motions, so that they are stilled or aborted. Certainly the motions of the rites and sacrifices necessary to keep it alive are wanting.) Professor Thompson therefore probes the African work only to discover that the verb Katherine White perceives is the copulative infinitive "to be." It is to an existential parsing of this infinitive that Thompson addresses his discourse; certainly it is to this aspect of a rich and complex book that I wish to address my remarks.

The Two Times of African Works

The African work exists in two times. The first time is that of the *piece seen* but not witnessed (much as we "see" it in a museum), the work subject to attenuation and decay. This is the time of the mask seen-as-danced and of the carved figure in procession; this is perceived time. The second time is that of *time witnessed*; now the particular is suspended and the work (carving, dance, musical performance, costume) prevails as myth, not irrespective of but mightily transcendent of the material particularity. There are, he writes, "two kinds of time, the real time of individual variation . . . and mythic time" (p. 43). The aesthetic problem is not first to show how to incarnate mythic time in "real" time, but rather to recognize simply that such is the case: that the work is misperceived if we witness it as a function of no more than "real" time. We might rather perceive the work as *act* in the ineffably slow time process of mythic *acting*.

In the reciprocal of relationship between these two times is fixed the African reality of time's lived passing, which we know in African sculpture (and other arts as well) as motion. Motion thus becomes a metaphor, one time's being enacted within another, distilling myth, in-

carinating it *in the process of being enacted*. So is it that in three-dimensional space the fourth dimension is made into presence (as in Christian rite the Word becomes flesh), abundant with the reality of living myth.

The chief lesson to be learned (if the reader will forgive the repetition of an important point) is that, because the art of Africa is ineluctably a time art, we ethnocentrically misconstrue it when we "see" it only spatially. Nor must we simplistically construe motion to be only the motion of the dance. Rather, we must discern how it is that the whole sculptural work before us incarnates motion as the very condition of its being—that the work of African art, after Katherine White, is a verb. In this connection, consider some of the topic-headings under which Professor Thompson approaches volumetric motion in his first chapter:

"Swing" every note and every color strong (most dancers in Africa step inside rhythms which are young and strong, and to this extent their bodies are generalized by vital rhythmic impulse.) . . . It is precisely an "attack impulse," in the staccato of handling solid and void, that distinguishes the "African-ness" of the Wum carved head from the north of the Cameroon Grasslands. . . .

Vital aliveness: playing the body parts with percussive strength. . . . Intensity in African color is paralleled by percussive attack in African musical and choreographic performance principles. . . . But the body parts are not only independently rhythmized and lent strength in African presentation, they are coherently realized within a larger dimension. The dynamic aspects are couched in a flexibly buoyant manner. . . .

Simultaneous suspending and preserving of the beat. . . . In some African styles art and music forms are enlivened by off-beat phrasing of the accents. . . . The regularity of striped patterning in Upper Volta weaving is sometimes spectacularly complicated by vibrant suspensions of expected placement of the patterns. . . .

The 'get-down quality': descending direction in melody, sculpture, dance. . . .

Multiple meter: dancing many drums. . . . [quoting Laura Bohannon, *Return to Laughter*] 'Duly she and the other senior women began my instruction: my hands and my feet were to keep time with the gongs, my hips with the first drum, my back and shoulders with the second.' [pp. 5–27, passim]

Thompson writes, "sculpture deepens motion by condensation of several actions into one" (p. xii). "Deepening" and "condensing" are to be seen as intensifiers in the conjugations of the existential infinitive. Further, "to be" predicatively inventories the existences of the world's things, states, and persons, attributing them with being—or at least with existence—or else denying them so much. Proposition after proposition heap together, constituting the experienced world. The heaped connectednesses of the world's phenomena exists

syndetically—through the assertion of simple copulative relationships. This is the way in which the world is in large measure known to us—as things causelessly, concatenatedly abutting one upon the other. Thus the accreted wholeness of the work prevails with the force of ancient familiarities, and so the work is a "condensation of various different actions into one."

What are deepened, condensed, and accreted into fullnesses are motions—predications of mythic time. We are not concerned with mere synesthesia here—in which one kind of sense phenomenon is interpreted in terms of the characteristics of another. We encounter here, Thompson tells us, the actual condensation and spatialization of time according to the infinite present of myth. The motions of art occur in deep, existential spaces in which time intrudes, pulsing being into them. These temporalities orchestrate the whole cultural work into that which the initiate properly perceives as a temporal collage—rather than after the fashion of the highly dialectical and resolutive musical dynamic to which we Westerners are most accustomed. (I draw the reader's attention to the discussion under "Correct Entrance and Exit," pp. 19–21.)

Thompson's work is at base a poetics of time, and its key signature is executed in the additivity of relationships—at base, those between the general and the particular, the mythic and the "real."

. . . the real time of individual variation and the mythic time of choral enactment. . . . We guess at their mutual interpenetration each time the call-and-response form seems to appear. This overlap situation combines innovative calls (or innovative steps, of the leader) with tradition (the choral round, by definition blurring individuality). Solo-ensemble work, among the many things it seems to accomplish, is the presentation of the individual on the ground of custom. It is the very perception of real and mythic time. [p. 43]

This poetic obtains not only in sculpture, we see, but also in music and dance—and in dance not only in the respect Thompson indicates but also in the relationship between the upper and lower parts of the body, by means of which balletic and sculptural multimetricity is enacted: the legs flexing one beat, the shoulders thrusting a second, the head asserting a third.

The space-eventuating poetic, Thompson observes with great insight, is the motif of the serrated edge. In his last chapter, he makes a point of the saw-toothed edge of the egungun costume's cloth panels which whirl in the act of dance. These cloths "have power in themselves" (p. 219); elsewhere he cites A. M. Jones' observation that African music is like the "teeth of a rip saw" (p. 13). These two observations constitute a most important image. For it is to be seen as revealing the "pinked" edge of the seam that will not ravel, binding together the powerful fabrics of the immortal and the mortal, the general and the particular. Thus is the individual "sewn" to eternity—the gods and the ancestors. The reality of man's time

zigzags between two times and two worlds. Those who would trace lineal patterns in African experience must do so through apparent indirections. What we might perceive as lacunae in the beats which one lives (and so, we might conclude, "nonlinear") are but interstices where, interpositionally and in another time, the counter-beat eventuates. This motif is dramatically enlarged when we think of all the instances in figural sculpture in which the legs are treated as zigzags. Indeed, there is one famous Lega ivory figure in which the entire body (forward-thrust shoulders, swung pelvis, bent-knees) is abstracted into a zigzag continuum (this figure is sometimes called a "serpent," but I think this present reading more compelling).

Indeed, the pattern of two-dimension (or two-plane, two-time, two-phase) syndetism informs the work either with propriety of enactment, under which circumstance it enriches the work, or else with impropriety, in which event it impoverishes it: "The arrogant dancer . . . may find that he dances to drums and handclaps of decreasing strength and fervor"; one who "starts a tale without proper preparation or refinement will find the choral answering . . . progressively weaker." In visual art, "visual motif (e.g., of master and entourage—RPA) seems an analogue . . . to the musical and choreographic solo-chorus theme" (pp. 27–28).

These syndetically complementary movements, "percussively" brought to articulate one upon another, exist in a larger context of total organization which Thompson calls "attitude"—standing, sitting, riding, kneeling, supporting (as an offertory bowl) and balancing (e.g., the relationship between the halves of a Janus-figure). Professor Thompson here (as indeed elsewhere in his conceptualization) comes close to the formulation of affecting presence, for these postures are to be seen not as symbols but as incarnations—as presentations of various existential states. These he explores somewhat after the fashion of the phenomenologist, suspending the truism and discovering the inner power of the work. Of this series of illuminations, the one devoted to *standing* is the one I shall note:

To stand is to intervene in a decisive way, attesting the power to compensate for perturbation, to maintain balance. It is a form of strength which engages the whole of a person. It is different from a single species of immobilization, such as the fixing of an iron bar within the earth. Human standing is a mode of affect and expression. The way a person stands communicates personality and lived relation with the world. Emphasis upon this mode in sculpture introduces an icon of vitalized persistence. . . . Horizontal positions correlate with darkness and death. Standing thus embodies light and life; it is the stance of day, the time of morality . . . Witches and thieves generally travel by night. [p. 49]

Thus we commence a hermeneutical implosion into the universe of standing things and the modes of their standing existence among the various other sorts of things that comprise the factitiously attitudinal world. We proceed through ancient myth-tales of Sundiata, the ancient emperor of Mali; past the standingfulness of twins, which stand "either to hear a prayer or to act" (p. 51) and whose standing "might be . . . defined as the stabilizing of bright inquiring eyes of divinity within the upright position of spiritual readiness" (p. 52); beyond the forests of mighty standing (Kongo nail fetishes) and the fantastic landscapes of standing spoons, harps, and altars (Yoruba opa Osanyin)—past all these, I repeat, to the conclusion:

Man contests, successfully, laws of mass and gravity, and thus establishes a cosmic principle of action. The quality is inherently heroic and rational, associated with the continuing presence of minds of chiefs and departed rulers. Standing images ideally are distinguished by an immortality-conferring, extra-temporal power that splendidly suggests a sphere of pure achievement. [p. 66]

But standing (and each of the other postural attitudes) is an enactment of vertical time, mythic time (the saw-toothed interpenetration of the mortal and the immortal is vertical time). Running at right-angle-complementarity to this—and aslant of it—is the horizontal world of death and witchcraft. This is mortal time, and every moment lived is an intersection of the two. This awesomely inevitable fact also defines a parsing point in the existential poetics of being-in-time. These enact the syndesis of real and mythic time. The vertical motion is the warp of our being human (mythic), the horizontal the weft of our particularity ("real"). Together they weave a cloth, serrated at the edge (how appropriate that the toothed edge seams against the immaterial space of nothingness), of whirling personhood. Thus they are complements in the time of our being. The warp is the long eternal, the continuities of life, the cultural . . . the verticals of the sun's light . . . the time of the gods and of our own rebirth; the warp is life's contingencies, the transitory, the vicissitudinous, ravelled up in texture and color. Together they shape a tapestry, as of people in dance—the primary metaphor of the existential of being in spaced-time.

Nigeria, Montol,
standing female,
wood, 12"



The Icon

While the poetics of time is of the greatest possible import to the study of art, persuading us to an *appropriate* view of the African work in particular (but also of all syndetic art and even of synthetic art in general), it is to the nature of the work itself that Professor Thompson devotes most of his attention. Still, he speaks not of the "work" as such but rather of the "icon," which, as we shall see, is a different sort of phenomenon. An icon is an act (one gleans from here and there, since no extended definition of icon is provided), an act that is the authoritative condensation of vital grace. This condensation is a syndetic configuration—or constellation—of things done (sculpture and costume) and of things happening (music and dance) (p. 117, *vide*). To these two categories we shall see that we ought also to add "attitudes assumed," "states achieved," and "cultural dynamics enacted."

I shall touch upon the several critical terms which occur in this collaged description of the icon:

- 1 The *manifestation* of an icon is an act in which things are copulatively predicated (syndetized) upon other things. These predications may be either between members of the same class ("things done" upon "things done," for example, as costume enriches mask through the metaphor of addition) or of different classes of things ("things done" upon "things happening," as mask and costume metaphorically enrich dance and music).
- 2 *Authoritative* suggests that factor of cultural consent and validation characteristic of the condition under which the work of art in any culture might be perpetuated as such.
- 3 *Vital grace* goes undefined in the text. Therefore I shall assume that "grace" means what it ordinarily denotes in Christian teaching; namely, that spiritual gift which leads to salvation. "Vital" is, of course, an inevitable energy when one confronts African aesthetic phenomena which tend to be established in terms of their immanent, subjectivizing powers rather than visual ones. "Vital grace," therefore, may be seen as the power incarnate within the icon which derives from the confluence of beneficent energies, and which, realized, redeems. Indeed, this vital grace may under some circumstances be construed to exercise the force of "cooling moral aphorisms" (p. 203), an inevitable eventuation, given the profound import of the values thus established in presentation.

Yet all these attributives fail to reveal what at base an icon *is*. It *is* poeticized motion, which is to say, motion that exists in the enactment of slow, mythic time—either (we have learned) corporeal (vertical or horizontal, and in various rhythms) or attitudinal. We know that icon is not equivalent to "work" because Professor Thompson writes of attitude (sitting, riding, etc.) as "postural" icons (p. 112), an assertion that tends to modify our notion of the icon in such a way as to cause us to see that the icon's authority derives from certain mythic movements (movements of mythic time) incarnated. These are general African energies that may move independently among works

and cultures, and they too may syndetically accrete within a work—thus a sculptural array may have all these postural icons present, either flanking or surmounting one another. Thus postural icons are no less real than “ephebeism,” “mid-plane mimesis,” “percussive attack,” or, for that matter, than ancestors, divinatory instruments, flexed knees, hornedness, or horizontal masks. Whether one wishes to argue from the wide distribution of such icons the existence of a strongly Africanized version of the collective unconscious or, alternatively, to think in historical terms is a matter of individual preference that has little to do with the present discussion.

Icon, in brief, seems not to be precisely the same sort of phenomenon I have in mind when I write of “work of affecting presence,” which is, rather, an iconic complex. *Icon* seems rather to denominate aesthetic motifs of marked, immanent power which constellate into works as culturally validated concatenations. Icons exist primarily in the aesthetic of invocation—a syndetic aesthetic—rather than in the aesthetic of perception.

If there are both motional and postural icons which travel independently from one African culture to another, syndetically accreting into aesthetic traditions, one might wonder why it is that other dynamics which are also so characterized ought not to be thought icons as well. Thus we might see (in addition to the corporeal and attitudinal icons I have already mentioned) thematic icons (e.g., witchcraft), substantive icons (e.g., ancestors), stylistic icons (“cool,” percussive), and processive icons (syndetism, “suspending and preserving the beat,” etc.).

I wish to take this discussion of the iconic one step further, hoping Professor Thompson will forgive me, for one reads and merely “reviews” only the ordinary book; a good book one co-thinks. Thus my variations upon his themes are intended to compliment—and perhaps to complement as well. *Icon*, he says, is act; act, we see, is motion; and motion (we note especially in his excursion into masking and dancing in his last chapter) is performance. Performance, in its turn, is on the one hand enactment—as when dancer enacts gelede (antiwitchcraft) or egungun (ancestors) masks—and on the other invocation; sometimes, syndetically, it is both. In this latter sense of invocation, performance escapes the boundaries of particularity and becomes released into mythic time. Invocation is bent knees and thrust shoulders; it is dancing; it is also the summoning of the piece into presence through sacrifice, cosmetics, praise-names, music, costume, personality displacement—the *toute ensemble*. We thus, I believe, perceive here another and quintessential African icon (indeed, is it not an icon of much of man’s art, the world over?)—the icon of invocation itself.

Invocation is metaphor. It posits the immortal upon the mortal—the timeless upon the temporal, the temporal upon the spatial. For the metaphoric is of necessity the bondage (in a culture of synthesis) or the linkage (in a syndetic culture) of two or more sources of power. The icon of invocation is a temporal icon, for the urgency of the syndetic work is to become time just as the urgency

of the synthetic one is to become space (a mask in invocation transfiguring versus a Monet in a gallery—or a Berlioz in a music hall—making architectures in the eye and in the ear). Thus, wherever one seeks his point of departure in inquiry, he is bound to end up facing *time*. “Tiv multi-metric dancing restores music to muscular notation in which ‘notes’ are written in flesh . . .” (p. 16). Space is a distillation of time in the arts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the icon is the spatial distillate mythicized. The drum’s soul is its sound. Beating, it is soul metaphorized upon body. If one studies the body of space deeply, therefore, one cuts to the quick where the blood of time wells. What we approach with Professor Thompson are the premetaphoric fonts—the icons—of power under which time-beating and time-living root the experienced world.

Patrick R. McNaughton. *Secret Sculptures of Komo: Art and Power in Bamana (Bambara) Initiation Associations. Working Papers in the Traditional Arts: 4 ISHI, 1979.* 56 pp., 1 map, 12 black-and-white illustrations. \$3.95.

Reviewed by Jean M. Borgatti
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In an authoritative study of Komo and its associated sculpture, Patrick McNaughton indicates that the Komo mask, fraught with ambiguous visual references, remains the least understood of Bamana art forms, its manufacture and use shrouded in secrecy. The mask, an accumulation of animal and vegetal materials around a carved wooden core, functions as an instrument of divination and justice. It is worn by a high-ranking Komo association official—a sculptor-smith by right of birth and often the maker of the mask—who has spent the greater part of his life developing the capability to dance the mask and harness its energy on behalf of the community.

The study is divided into two main sections: the context of the sculpture, focusing on Bamana initiation associations, and the sculpture of the Komo association specifically, with emphasis resting on the mask, its construction, symbolism, and aesthetic. The author begins with a clear description of the initiation associations and a brief review of the literature, which attempts to rationalize the