

information, as executioners of techniques that (we have to presume) have changed little over the past 1,000 years.

The narrative of the exhibition in this way seems to include several strands: that told by the archaeological material on display; that concerning the technical aspects of their production; that concerning the historical context for the collection of the artefacts; and that of the relevance of the artefacts today. Yet how these strands speak to one another is left unclear. A concluding commentary invites the visitor to recognize affinities between the artefacts displayed and today's world. The exhibition might have encouraged that kind of recognition by fleshing out and weaving those strands together in a single, and perhaps more complex, story.

Drewal, H. J. and E. Schildkrout (2010) *Kingdom of Ife: sculptures from West Africa*. London: The British Museum Press.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972011000167

Review of the exhibition *Djenné: African City of Mud*, Royal Institute of British Architects (London), 3 March–29 April 2010 (extended until 29 May).

At the heart of Mali's Inland Niger delta, the ancient town of Djenné was once a vital crossroads for trans-Saharan commercial trade. With its 'sister city' Timbuktu, Djenné's reputation grew as an important Islamic Studies centre and attracted scholars to the region. In recent years, the mud-brick architecture of Djenné and its famous mud-brick mosque have emerged as the focal aspects of the town, capturing the imagination of overseas tourists who visit in large numbers. In 1988, the town was added to the world heritage list by UNESCO, with strict moves to preserve the unique architecture. In the exhibition *Djenné: African City of Mud*, curated by Trevor H. J. Marchand, the integral roles of the masons of Djenné are presented as well as the wider positionings of Djenné inhabitants (Djennenkés) within diverse social contexts. Marchand portrays the city, locating it geographically and economically within a loose historical framework whilst maintaining a narrative that reveals insights into the daily lives of its inhabitants. The exhibition contains few references to contemporary localized-versus-Western heritage politics (with the tensions that ensue, such as cultural ownership, alienation and issues of authenticity). Rather, it challenges the freeze-framing constraints on architecture as heritage by exposing the more internally dynamic and intimate worlds of Djenné and Djennenkés.

On the top floor mezzanine of the Royal Institute of British Architects (London), the free-entry exhibition ran from 3 March–29 April 2010 (extended until 29 May). Marchand, a trained architect, is Professor of Anthropology at the University of London (SOAS). The exhibition was the outcome of his research on the masons of Djenné (2001–5), with fieldwork (2001 and 2002) and a book publication (2009). Marchand signed on as a labourer and an apprentice mason on Djenné construction sites to gain insight into the architectural heritage as well as an understanding of trade skill communication, and this is reflected throughout the exhibition. Accompanying *Djenné: African City of Mud* were a series of talks, lectures, guided tours, and a screening of the documentary film co-produced with Susan Vogel and Samuel Sidibe (2007).

The exhibition is divided into seven sections that cover Djenné's inhabitants, mud architecture, mud-brick mosques, drought, conservation, and, of course, the

famous masons. Poster-sized photographs taken by Marchand are the essential media employed. Further exhibits include maps, print reproductions, masonry tools (trowel, plumbline, levelling cord and a woven basket for transporting mud, for example), and architectural sketches on loan from the Leiden Volkenkunde Museum (of archetypal buildings and house façades with distinctive features annotated in the local vernacular). The image that confronts the visitor as he/she enters the exhibition space is of a young mason on a ladder looking up into the camera. Through a series of portrait photographs, Marchand brings Djenné to life – the section ‘Locating Djenné’ documents its rich and specialized craft production, from embroidery and tailoring to boat building and smithing. A woman selling beaded jewellery at the Monday market serves to address domestic economies and is a reminder of Djenné’s continuing position as an important regional trade centre. Historical Djenné is considered in terms of how Djenné captured the European imagination, aided by colonial administrators, ethnographers, popular journalists and photographers. Issues of authenticity, of representation and imagination are addressed via text panels and black and white postcards circa 1906 of street scenes, key buildings and reproductions of the Sudanese pavilion at the Paris Colonial Exposition, 1931.

The rest of the exhibition focuses more directly on mud-brick architecture, Djenné masons, and contemporary Djenné. An overview of the internal organizational structure of the masonry ‘guild-like’ association (*barey ton*) explains ties of patronage between households and families of masons. Portrait images again capture the masons’ different statuses, including a building labourer, an apprentice and a brick maker. Here is an (unfortunately rare) image of the interior of a Djenné house, showing how it is used and lived in. Marchand highlights the fragility of Djenné’s mud architecture by revealing insights into localized contemporary realities, particularly among younger generations. A combination of erosive environmental and social factors – drought, open sewers, emigration, the unstable economy – and modernizing change – formal schooling, imported commodities, web access and mobile phone technology – has demoted the status of masonry and mud-brick architecture, the upkeep of which is increasingly demanding (a problem accentuated in the 1970s and 1980s by inheritance issues and lack of funds for restoration). The exhibition carefully positions the ‘tenuous balance’ between visually aesthetic architecture that is admired and photographed by visitors, and being young and having to live in mud-brick houses. While Marchand succeeds in sensitively exposing the changing worlds of Djenné and paying tribute to masons’ expertise, the Djenné voices sounded somewhat distant. Names were not recorded in image captions (‘Portrait of a mason’, ‘Quranic student’, ‘A mason ascending a ladder’) and there were no direct citations or personal references. The curatorial voice remained singular and authoritative, albeit discreet. It would also have been interesting to learn about local responses to the research and to the concept of the exhibition.

The Djenné Mosque is considered the largest mud-brick building in the world and Marchand’s account is vivid and vibrant. Architectural drawings and illustrations of similar mosques inspired by the distinctive architecture (in Mopti, Timbuktu, and the Dogon region) help the visitor to learn to recognize similarities between the variant styles (at this point we are shown the documentary film, with, as climax, the annual re-coating of the Mosque). The final section of the exhibition recalls the early images of Djenné as Marchand revisits ‘Exporting Djenné’ through contemporary postcards and prominent masons invited to reproduce their work at overseas festivals (Washington 2003, South Korea and Holland). I was delighted to recognize some familiar faces in this section, and *Djenné: African City of Mud* provided an accessible insight into architectural

mud-brick practices, issues of representation and social roles in Djenné today. The exhibition was sponsored by SOAS, ESRC, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. All proceeds were donated to support Oxfam's projects in Mali.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972011000179