

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND ARTS

Z. S. Strother. *Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xv + 344 pp. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$50.00 Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-02267-7.

The cover of Z. S. Strother's new book, *Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art*, features a sculpture by a Bembe artist depicting a European trader carried by *tipoy*. While the humor is not readily apparent to a Western viewer, Strother explains that we see a sleepy European carried by two lost, tired porters, a "comedy team bumbling down the path" (157). Through in-depth study of the sculpture and its historical context, Strother helps readers see the humor in the facial expressions as well as the underlying violence that led to a white man being carried by two Africans. Across the 157-year scope of her book, Strother finds examples of objects from 1840 to 1997 depicting both violent and humorous episodes. Through analysis of individual objects and historical sources, she navigates the complexity of sculptures and paintings that speak to two audiences, showing how central African artists have used humor to comment on violent regimes since the precolonial period.

The pairing of humor and violence brings to mind the saying "laughter is the best medicine." Indeed, Strother's preface includes a Pende example of laughter used as medicine (xii). But while the saying refers to healing oneself, Pende view laughter as a medicine meant to weaken an opponent. With this initial example, we already see one main thrust of Strother's book: laughter is complicated and specific, and any understanding of the role of humor in art must consider creator and audience, place and time. Humor is laden with unspoken power struggles, outlining what can and cannot be said. Yet central African history is no laughing matter. In the time period and in the geographical area covered in this book, which begins with the Loango Coast (from present-day Gabon to Angola) and later includes other areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many of the most violent relations of power existed between Europeans and Africans, first between traders, and later between colonizers and colonized. Strother's study begins in 1840, as the Atlantic slave trade was declining. Continuation of illicit human trafficking and the desire for new commodities such as palm oil, rubber, and ivory provide ample examples of violence in pursuit of power and profit into the twentieth century.

Before beginning her chronological study of central African art depicting humor and violence, Strother includes a chapter amusingly titled "Warning! What Do You See? A White Man? Or an Overdressed One?" Here Strother teaches the reader how to identify a potential European, relying on fashion of the period and, most importantly, gesture. That said, she points out that anyone can don a sack suit and put hands in pockets. The most reliable way to identify a European?—the presence of his floppy-eared dog. This chapter introduces us to one of Strother's greatest strengths, which is her focus on gesture and performance, while also showing how one must take into account the full context of an object to understand what is depicted, and for whom.

Two chapters on Loango Coast ivories follow, including one that features unflinching descriptions of the slave trade. Strother makes a convincing case for reading ivories not as a winding linear narrative, as other scholars have proposed, but as sets of vertical juxtapositions. She then moves on to the colonial period, leaving the Loango Coast for northeast Congo and several in-depth analyses of gourds from the Uele region made at the peak of the so-called Red Rubber brutality. Next, in a chapter examining arts made by Congolese artists for fellow Congolese, Strother takes the reader to Pendeland, where she conducted extensive fieldwork. Here she discusses sexually explicit satire, as well as the “power object” of a Belgian officer killed at the outset of the 1931 Pende revolt. Finally, Strother concludes with a chapter on *arts populaires* from 1950 to 1997, ending with Chéri Samba and the fall of Mobutu.

Humor and Violence is an excellent book of art historical scholarship and a pleasure to read. By focusing on a relatively small number of objects, Strother allows herself to dwell on particulars. She slowly unspools meaning from details like expression, gesture, and clothing, while calling on European and African sources for context. The only drawback is that a reader may become so enveloped in the story of an object that the larger narrative becomes lost. The scope of the book is vast, covering precolonial trade to postcolonial regimes and an area the size of western Europe, and the examination of Congolese history through art is an innovative approach. Readers will be rewarded with insightful analysis, clear presentation of historical events, and the occasional laugh-out-loud moment as dogs and monkeys make their way across the page.

Elaine E. Sullivan
 University of California, Los Angeles
 Los Angeles, California
 eesullivan@ucla.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2017.76

Chika Okeke-Agulu. *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. xix + 357 pp. Illustrations/Paintings. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.46. Paper. ISBN: 978-0822357469.

In *Postcolonial Modernism*, Chika Okeke-Agulu discusses how ideologies of pan-Africanism, decolonization, and nationalism influenced the emergence of postcolonial Nigerian artistic modernism. Okeke-Agulu focuses on the Art Society, a group of young artists who studied at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria in the late 1950s. Okeke-Agulu demonstrates how the artistic works of the Art Society “show both a deep connection with local artistic traditions and the stylistic sophistication” (2) of twentieth-century modernist art, revealing how artists translated Nigeria’s political independence from Britain into artistic modernism.