

## HUMOR AND VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AFRICAN ART

*Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art.*

By Z. S. Strother.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 344.

\$50.00, paperback (ISBN 9780253022677).

doi:10.1017/S0021853718000622

**Key Words:** Congo, art, colonialism, violence.

In this book, art historian Z. S. Strother shows how a corpus of nineteenth- to twentieth-century Congolese art attests to the ways that artists, and by extension their communities, negotiated colonial and postcolonial violence and upheaval by employing strategies of critique and humor in visual modes. Through close readings of the art and careful historical contextualization, Strother examines artists' sly observations, caricatures, and criticisms of Europeans. She contrasts those depictions with widespread, pejorative European representations of Congolese peoples (and of African people in general) in travel narratives and popularly, such as in the early twentieth-century Belgian illustrated serial, *Aventures de Tintin* by Hergé.

*Humor and Violence* traverses broadly across Congolese history and geography. It encompasses historical art of Kongo, Nkanu, Pende, and Zande cultural origins, and also analyzes contemporary paintings by artists from Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. Strother draws from a wide range of artistic genres to make her argument, including works made for sale as souvenirs to Europeans, artistic goods meant for traditions-based use by Congolese patrons, and art that is produced in urban centers in Congo and Belgium for local and global contemporary markets.

Strother grounds her examination of these artistic practices with an extensive consideration of nineteenth-century Loango Coast ivory sculptures in two chapters that stand at the book's core. These ivories were made by Kongo-Vili artists to sell to foreigners as souvenirs. Strother seizes upon the ivories' vivid representations that range from seemingly benign to dramatically violent. She makes a compelling argument attributing the works' persistent portrayal of slave trade activity, long after the trade's official dissolution on the Loango Coast, to popular demand for this theme resulting from the success of David Livingstone's 1865 accounts of the East African slave trade.

Strother's treatment of contemporaneous narratives written by Europeans who worked in or visited the region serves as a primer on white travelers' notions of superiority, as well as on their concerns, prejudices, and consternations. Those Europeans explored, abused, and depended upon Africans, and Strother's examination reveals the discomfort and contradictions inherent in those relations. Through careful analysis informed by her understanding of Kongo thought and visual language, Strother further demonstrates how the Kongo-Vili artists captured these tensions in the ivories' imagery to cutting and humorous effect, while also communicating through overt and coded means the social and emotional costs of European interactions. Although these European travel narratives are necessary for contextualizing the sculptures, occasionally the investigation seems excessively drawn out, to the point that it detracts from the imagery and diminishes the Kongo-Vili voices and perspectives that gave

form to the sculptures. Nevertheless, the text eventually returns to the art and to its possible indigenous meanings. The analysis of these ivory sculptures furthermore serves as a foundational reference for the art forms explored in the remaining chapters.

Of note is Chapter Six, in which Strother focuses on arts made for Congolese patronage. In that chapter, the examination of a sculpture portraying a colonial officer makes for some of the most riveting passages of the book. Here, Strother's field-based expertise on Pende art (see Strother, *Inventing Masks*, 1998) and her understanding of the Belgian colonial archive and the region's history provide revelatory information about this object, which could easily be mistaken as a *colon* figure made for the souvenir market. Strother, in collaboration with the curatorial and conservation teams of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, which owns the sculpture, deconstructs this unusual work. Not only does the figure appear to be a portrait of a specific Belgian officer killed in the 1931 Pende Revolt, but it also likely served as a power object, or 'war medicine', that was designed to protect an individual Pende from the destructiveness of the colonial regime.

Throughout the book, Strother deftly weaves incisive visual analysis together with historical records. The rich object studies that she carries out are couched by an astute and steadfast reckoning with the uses of humor and critique within a context of violence and turmoil. Towards this end, Strother draws upon Western and African theorists as well as voices from the archive, all the while acknowledging that Congolese expressions of spiritual survival and assertions of humanity depended upon intangibility and indirectness.

Strother makes clear that Congolese artists lived through, and made a record of, the violence of the transatlantic slave trade, forced labor, rubber quotas, and colonial abuses, as well as the political upheavals and transformations that accompanied the creation of the Congo Free State, the resistance of the Pende Revolt, the rise and demise of Patrice Lumumba, the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, and the *pillages* of Kinshasa. *Humor and Violence* illuminates these wide-ranging historical moments of contact and conflict in the Congo in a readable, accessible text. Congolese artists bore witness to strikes of the *chicotte*, as well as to leering glances, insults, and assaults – and they found the strength to laugh.

NICHOLE N. BRIDGES  
Saint Louis Art Museum

## THE SLAVE TRADE ON THE WESTERN SLAVE COAST

*Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast, c. 1550–c. 1885.*

By Silke Strickrodt.

Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2015. Pp. xiv + 266. \$80.00, hardback (ISBN 9781847011107);

\$29.95, paperback (ISBN 9781847011787).

doi:10.1017/S0021853718000634

**Key Words:** West Africa, precolonial, slave trade, slavery, commerce.

As has been well established, Atlantic commercial entanglements generated wide-reaching impacts on communities across West Africa's coast and hinterlands. The royal capitals of