

songs that accompany the performances, performance styles among the ethnic groups that use puppets, and the themes represented by the puppets. These include heroic men, wild animals, bush spirits, commentaries on contemporary social and political life, and beautiful and dangerous females. The volume is illustrated with thirty-five color field photographs that place the puppet tradition in context and by color photographs of the puppets shown in the exhibition. With an expertise based on more than thirty years of research on puppet traditions in central Mali, Arnoldi is able to document the transitions in these traditions over time; these include the use of increasingly larger puppets for viewing by greatly enlarged audiences. Furthermore, her analysis shows the changes in puppetry themes that reflect contemporary social concerns. As in her previous writings, Arnoldi has crafted the current volume with impeccable scholarship and a gift for describing complex cultural phenomena with a clarity that makes the contents easily accessible and a pleasure to read.

These two volumes, written by two outstanding scholars, represent important and groundbreaking contributions to our knowledge of the arts of Africa. They are highly recommended to a very broad audience of readers.

Pascal James Imperato
*State University of New York
 Downstate Medical Center
 Brooklyn, New York*

Kristina Van Dyke, ed. *African Art from the Menil Collection*. Houston, Tex.: Menil Foundation, 2008. Foreword by Josef Helfenstein. Distributed by Yale University Press. 239 pp. Photographs. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Works Cited. Index. Contributors. \$65.00. Cloth. \$45.00. Paper.

African Art from the Menil Collection was produced and published in conjunction with the reinstallation of the African art galleries at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2008, marking the first curatorial reevaluation of the material since the museum opened to the public in 1987. As such, the catalog is less a scholarly investigation into recent issues in African art scholarship than it is a celebration of the one thousand individual objects in the Menil Collection and of the de Menils' role in bringing African art to Houston. More than twenty highly regarded scholars contribute entries on the 115 objects illustrated in the catalog, a testament to the respect and interest maintained across the field of African art for the Menil Collection and the objects it contains.

Kristina Van Dyke, appointed in 2005 to be the Menil Collection's first curator of African art, organized the reinstallation of the African galleries and this accompanying catalog—the result of three years' labor and her first major contribution to African art studies. While the catalog organizes

the objects by geographical region—"North Africa and the Sahel," "Coastal West Africa," and "Central and East Africa"—the exhibition of the pieces in Houston follows a different strategy. In the galleries, the objects are organized around formal expressions of the human form; variations on male figures, abstract figures, miniature figures, female figures, and so on are grouped together for comparative analysis. While this strategy can certainly be criticized for creating diffusionist-style comparisons across nonrelated visual paradigms, it does illuminate the dominant preference for figurative art in the de Menils' collecting practices. As such, it more clearly relates the African figures to the modernist works of painting and sculpture that make up the bulk of the sixteen thousand objects in the collection. It is well documented that the de Menils' interest in modern art of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly surrealism, inspired them to begin collecting African art in the 1950s, as the budding interest in so-called primitive art was understood to be a driving factor in the reevaluation of the human figure in many early twentieth-century European artistic movements. Thus the de Menils always saw their African (and also Oceanic and Northwest Coast) objects as participating in a dialogue with European modernism, a feature that the reinstallation certainly references in its focus on figuration.

It is slightly surprising therefore, that the catalog follows a more neutral geographical organization, despite Van Dyke's introductory essay, "*La rencontre humaine: African Art in The Menil Collection*," which focuses on the de Menils' collecting practices, their interests in relating African to European art, and their support of educational efforts in African art. Given that the essay, a revised version of an earlier article ("The Menil Collection: Houston Texas," *African Arts* 40, 3 [2007]: 36–49), focuses on the de Menils' project rather than on the African objects themselves, it would not seem unreasonable to complete the curatorial vision by keeping the figural organization of the galleries intact in the catalog entries. Arguably, however, the fact that the catalog does not is a good thing. Given that it is intended for wide distribution, it takes on a larger educational role, and an organization of the material by figure type would undoubtedly have drawn criticism from many of the same scholars who contributed their work to the catalog entries. It is one thing to apply a dated concept to a gallery installation in order to intentionally refer to the collecting mentality of the 1950s. But it would be entirely different to present this as a still-relevant strategy for interpreting African art objects, which in this collection alone represent a wide swath of countries and cultures and disparate time periods. The geographical organization of the catalog, therefore, is a relief.

A further point of pride for the catalog is, most certainly, the name recognition of the many contributing scholars, and Van Dyke deserves credit for amassing so many of them to write about objects from their individual areas of expertise. Robert Farris Thompson, Doran H. Ross, Christopher D. Roy, Barbara Blackmun, Leon Siroto, and William Siegmann contribute linguistic, formal, symbolic, and stylistic meanings that come from their

collective lifetimes' worth of experience in an ever-changing field. Their entries are supplemented by new research and subsequent discoveries by Constantine Petridis, Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, Elisabeth L. Cameron, Marla C. Berns, Arthur Bourgeois, Kate Ezra, Dominique Malaquais, and Marie Yvonne Curtis. Emerging scholars' work is also acknowledged through the introduction of Susan Sutton, Prita Meier, and Cécile Fromont. Of note also is the inclusion of Salia Malé, the curator of the National Museum of Mali, who contributes three catalog entries on animal headdresses and masks from Mali. Additional entries come from Robert T. Soppelsa, Jessica Levin Martinez, Mary K. Lambrakos, and Miranda Lash.

Susan Kart
Sarah Lawrence College
Bronxville, New York