



**Gary van Wyk.** *SHANGAA: Art of Tanzania.* New York: QCC Art Gallery, 2013. Illustrations. 341 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936658-14-5.



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## The Astonishing Arts of Tanzania

It is difficult to avoid superlatives in discussing *SHANGAA: Art of Tanzania*, a comprehensive academic study that will remain an indispensable resource for years to come. As an introduction to a generally overlooked area of African art, it provides an extravagant visual tour through the 345 illustrations. For those fortunate to have seen the exhibition by the same name, curated by Gary van Wyk, either at its originating venue, the Queensborough Community College Art Gallery in New York City (February 22-May 17, 2013) or when it traveled to the Portland Museum of Art in Maine (June 8-August 25, 2013), the volume's lavish illustrations permit a renewed experience of the "amazing" art objects assembled from public and private collections. And for those encountering the art for the first time, the quality of the illustrations provides a rewarding introduction, and of equal importance, numerous examples of the artworks in historical and contemporary contexts. In addition, as has become almost standard by now, the volume moves well beyond the category of exhibition catalogue and is instead a scholarly monograph that stands on its own.

The eleven chapters and seven short essays by prominent academics offer the opportunity to become immersed in Tanzanian art from a wide range of perspectives. Van Wyk is to be congratulated both for organizing the ambitious exhibition and for editing, compiling, and contributing to this volume. In Kiswahili, "Shangaa" means to amaze or astonish, and van Wyk states that the perception that "Tanzania is poor in art" is itself astonishing, "an idea that this project ... aims to confound" (p. 25).

In his introduction, van Wyk surveys the relevant literature and places it in the context of Tanzanian history. Expanding on this initial survey, the comprehensive bibliography that closes the book emphasizes historical, ethnographical, and anthropological sources, as monographic studies of the art are relatively few. The published art historical accounts include Ladislav Holý's *Masks from Eastern and Southern Africa* (1967), Hans Cory's *African Figurines: Their Ceremonial Use in Puberty Rites in Tanganyika* (1956), Christopher C. Roy's *Kilengi: African Art from the Bareiss Family Collection*

(1999), Charles Bordogna and Leonard Kahanâs *A Tanzanian Tradition* (1989), Jens Jahnâs *Tanzania: Meisterwerke Africanischer Skulptur/Sanaa za Mabingwa wa Kiafrika* (1994), Manfred Ewel and Anne Outwaterâs edited collection *From Ritual to Modern Art: Tradition and Modernity in Tanzanian sculpture* (2001), and Marion Arnoldâs general survey *Art in Eastern Africa* (2008). As van Wyk points out, many of these publications are hard to find today, and in any event are illustrated only in black and white. *SHANGAA* offers recent research and fieldwork in addition to its broad scope of topics, thus filling a gap in the scholarship on African art generally. Given its importance, it is disappointing that the book has not been more widely distributed, but is available only through the Queensborough Community College Art Gallery at <http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/artgallery/productDetail.asp?productID=11>.

The book opens with a map of Tanzania and a pie graph illustrating the proportion of each of its 120 ethnic groups to the total population, the most numerous being the Sukuma. Given the overwhelming number of groups, and the fact that the region was crossed by traders for millennia before emerging as a nation in 1964 with the merger of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, it is only logical that neither a national style nor clear ethnic distinctions exist. As van Wyk points out, "the closer one examines locales, the more their purported ethnic character dissolves" (p. 27). As a result, "the African Art History paradigm of 'one tribe, one style' is particularly inappropriate for Tanzanian peoples" (p. 28). (Nonetheless, the caption for each object illustrated in this book is identified by its ethnic group and approximate date, thereby conforming to long-standing museum cataloguing conventions.) Instead of an examination of regional styles, the essays place the artworks in their cultural contexts, specifically as performed in rituals or employed in daily use. The overall goal is to "present the arts of Tanzania as living traditions, linked to long-enduring practices, linked to the dead" (p. 51). In the end, to chart these ever-changing contexts, many of the authors do rely on classical art historical connoisseurship. For example, in his analysis of the spectacular late nineteenth-century "throne" or chair that has been attributed to the Nyamwezi group, van Wyk convincingly argues that it was made by the Kimbu group (fig. 1.18, p. 68).

Chapter 2, "People on the Ruvuma: Karl Weule Explores the Makonde and Their Neighbors," by Giseller Blesse of the Leipzig Museum of Ethnology, exemplifies the careful and evenhanded approach to Tanzanian cultural history found throughout this volume. It would

have been a relatively simple matter to portray the early twentieth-century German ethnologist Weule as a typical colonialist who looted the patrimony of the Makonde and nearby peoples; however, the essay (translated by van Wyk) portrays a rather more sympathetic individual who meticulously recorded cultural practices and paid for the objects he collected. A further investigation of Weuleâs ethnographic enterprise in the context of German colonialism would have been welcome, but in the remainder of the essay Blesse turns instead to a stylistic analysis of masks from the Ruvuma River region.[1]

In contrast, in the subsequent chapter, "Art of the Frontier: Sculpture and the Border Mentality along the Ruvuma River," art historian Alexander Bortolot provides an enlightening account of the history and cross-cultural exchanges across the border between what is now Tanzania and Mozambique. Based on extensive archival and field research, Bortolot traces such topics as initiation rites and ritual performances through colonial history to the present. For example, one especially beautiful crucifix, a somewhat anomalous entry in the catalogue, would have been produced for a Christian mission, but, as Bortolot points out, the sculptureâs "African features and air of suffering suggest an empathy with the subject, perhaps stemming from personal belief" (p. 125). In other words, this Christian icon is also part of the story of Makonde culture, as are contemporary Mozambican Liberation Front (FREMLO) party performances in Mozambique that now include women.

Art historian Fadhi Mshanaâs "Art for Life among Coastal Peoples of Tanzania" examines the various ritual practices pertaining to female initiation and ancestral rites, primarily in the matrilineal societies of the Kwere and Zaramo. In "Transformation of the Arts of Healing in Northeastern Tanzania," art historian Barbara Thompson continues the analysis of objects, in this instance those involved in ritual healing practices. Central to Thompsonâs argument is that "in the traditional worldviews of Bantu-speaking peoples living in the northeastern highlands of Tanzania, suffering is as much caused by human behavior, environmental conditions, pathogens and chance as by the Supreme Being (God), ancestors, and other spiritual forces. When an individual or community suffers enigmatic disease or misfortune, it is often attributed to the breach of social, religious, political, or other cultural norms" (p. 161). She then traces the history of *uganga*, the sacred arts of healing, through two centuries of medicine objects, with photographs of the objects in use today.

All of the essays in this volume provide documentary evidence of the continuation of so-called traditional cultural practices in contemporary contexts through the creative invention of new forms. One such context is the call by President Julius Nyerere in the early 1960s to "seek out the best of the traditions and customs of all the tribes and make them part of our national culture" (p. 187), an ideological project that could in fact have the negative effect of circumscribing investigation and creativity (p. 187). In "Performing Cultures: Rural Traditions in the History of Tanzania's Post-Independence Nationalist Project," art historians Sandra Klopper and Rehema Nchimbi, basing their argument heavily on Kelly Askew's *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (2002), look specifically at *ngoma* dance practices and their adaptation during Nyerere's call for indigenization. The essay is a bit disappointing in the brevity of its analysis, but the topic of dance practice does receive further explication elsewhere. In the concluding section of the book, for instance, van Wyk and art dealer Mohammed Jaffer discuss dance societies in detail; the most impressive of these are the snake societies, where ritual, entertainment, competition, and healing mix in spectacular displays of snake handling. As interesting as the accompanying photographs are, however, the films of these ceremonies that were shown in the exhibition were far more riveting, the moving images conveying the physical vitality and energy of the dancers.

The complex issue of cross-cultural influences both among the peoples of Tanzania and across the country's borders is tackled in the magisterial essay, "Movement of Ideas and Forms between Central and Eastern Africa," by anthropologist Allen F. Roberts. Although Lake Tanganyika would seem to present an enormous barrier to exchange between the Tanzanian peoples on its eastern side and the Congolese on the west, trade in ivory and slaves led to communication on many different cultural levels, including the spiritual and artistic. Roberts first noticed Tanzanian influence on the Congolese Tabwa when undertaking doctoral research there in the 1970s. His nuanced analysis of the various influences found in the figurative sculpture made by the peoples on both sides of the lake provides strong support for his argument for continuous exchange, and his interpretations of individual pieces demonstrate that the exchange went far beyond the mundane level of trade. Yet, despite the formidable scholarship in this essay, Roberts acknowledges that some of his interpretations must remain speculative, and concludes that "art histories of western Tanzania and southeastern Congo are still in their infancy"

(p. 215). [2] Perhaps this is so, but the decades of research represented in the essays by each author in this volume provide a solid foundation for future scholarship.

The largest group among the Tanzanian peoples is the Sukuma, and the last essay in the book, by art historian Aimée Bessire, examines its art, culture, and heritage. Again the emphasis is on divination and healing, and again the narrative is based on extensive field research. Although much of the essay covers the same subjects found in van Wyk's introduction, Bessire's first-hand reports on healers and on dance competitions lend the topic an immediacy that registers its centrality to contemporary lives. (I was sad to learn that the life-sized wooden dance figures—Mabinda—that grace the cover of this book, are no longer used today. However, new types of exchange have emerged.) Expanding on the topic of cross-cultural exchange that is the focus of Roberts's and Bortolot's essays, Bessire places current cultural practice in a global context. If the Congolese Tabwa and the Tanzanian Tongwe might be assumed to share cultural beliefs broadly, the same surely cannot be said of the Danish and the Sukuma. Yet an exchange that has occurred since 1977 and has been celebrated in an annual Sukuma festival in Djursland, Denmark since 1982 could be considered a sort of experiment in postcolonial globalism: because of the duration of the exchange, and because, despite inequalities, the representatives of the two cultures have increasingly become "family" in a genuine sense. As Bessire concludes, "in our increasingly global world, from the rich ground of such cross-cultural sharing will emerge new forms and possibilities" (p. 293).

The essays in *SHANGAA: Art of Tanzania* are too complex to be adequately summarized here, but I hope this review communicates some sense of the importance of the book's contribution to African art scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. Among the 121 masks Weule purchased were two Makonde masterpieces now in the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig that were among the highlights of the SHANGAA exhibition: a hare and a square-eyed human face.

[2]. At the beginning of his essay, Roberts credits two earlier scholarly volumes with initiating the study of this topic: Terence Ranger, "The Movement of Ideas, 1850-1939," in *History of Tanzania*, ed. Isaria Kimambo and A. J. Temu (Nairobi: East African Publishing House; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 161-188; and Ladislav Holý, *Masks and Figures from Eastern and Southern Africa* (London: Hamlyn, 1967).

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