

The President and Fellows of Harvard College Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Autobiography and Art History: The Imperative of Peripheral Vision

Author(s): Suzanne Preston Blier

Source: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 39 (Spring, 2001), pp. 24-40

Published by: [The President and Fellows of Harvard College](#) acting through the [Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167521>

Accessed: 25-07-2015 14:32 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The President and Fellows of Harvard College and Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

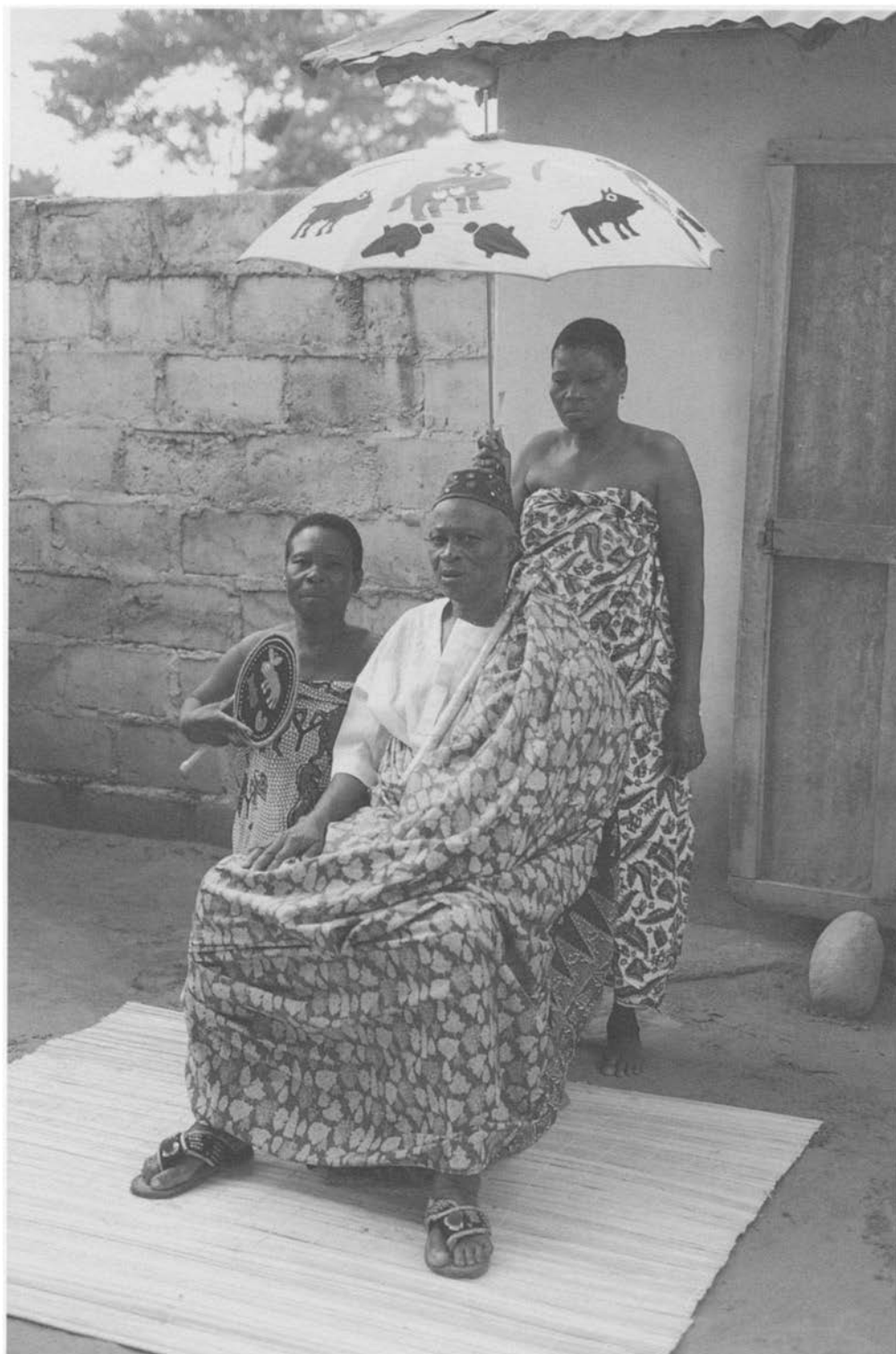


Figure 12. Da (Lord) Sagbadju and his family. Abomey, Republic of Benin. July 1986.

Autobiography and art history

The imperative of peripheral vision

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

Recently I rediscovered a photograph (fig. 1) that shows my late mother and father in New York at the Zanzibar Cafe in 1945 celebrating both the defeat of Hitler and my father's return from fighting in World War II.¹ The occasion of the photograph's rediscovery was the breaking apart of my family home in Vermont following my mother's death in March 1998 and my father's passing three months earlier. I find the photograph a particularly salient first image for my discussion here. I also find it quite a troubling first image. My father loved jazz. The Zanzibar Cafe was a jazz club, and the photograph's cover/frame (fig. 2) evokes the sad history of race and gender portrayal in the West, even as the artistic brilliance of African-Americans was being promoted in music. Now, a confession. When I first saw the photograph and its jacket in my teens, it did not strike me as strange or troubling. The most important feature of the photograph and cover for me today is the blindness that I (they?) had to its racial and sexual subtext.

George Marcus reminds us in *The Traffic in Culture* (1995:208) of the importance of reflexivity—of the imperative of addressing the conditions and relations of the production of knowledge as an essential part of producing that knowledge. Reflexivity is also about routes, the complementary paths that move through both the personal lives of scholars and their intellectual arenas. By focusing on the production of knowledge as an essential part of the knowledge that is produced, Marcus suggests that we are challenged to “. . . personalize the process of inquiry, but not primarily for the purpose of self-understanding. Rather [in order to close] . . . the difference between the observer and observed, the subject and the object, the writer and his or her referent . . . through a . . . sensitivity to how one is always in a very definite and complex social relationship to [the] . . . object of knowledge. . . .” Edmund Leach, in

his review of Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives* in *American Ethnologist* of February 1989 is even more blunt: “As Anthropologists we need to come to terms with the now well-recognized fact that in a novel the personalities of the characters are derived from aspects of the personality of the author. How could it be otherwise? The only Ego that I know first hand is my own. When Malinowsky writes about Trobriand Islanders, he is writing about himself, when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself.”²

The following article is similarly concerned with the shaping of knowledge, with the ways that art historians (as both viewers and delimiters of artistic vision) define the subjects that we study. The questions I ponder while addressing the larger question of *subjectivity* is not only how we chose our *subjects* (and approaches to these topics) but also how the meanings of the related art works are shaped through this process. My interest, in other words, is in how the “pasts” and “presents” of each of us guide the intellectual journeys we take in pursuing our inquiries.

As scholars, I suggest, we are little different from the reading or long-distance glasses (and contacts) that many of us are obliged to wear. The best research and writing also necessarily is “impaired” (or at best fuzzy) with regard to certain elements, whether because of partial vision or the intentional wearing of blinders. Good scholarship, in essence, requires a certain sense of peripheral vision. An apt analogy is the importance of rear-view mirrors when driving a car on a busy thoroughfare. As every driver knows—whether tackling the roads of Boston, Lagos, Los Angeles, or Abidjan—even the sleekest and best running cars have a blind spot on the driver's side. The danger is not in the blind spot itself, however, but rather in forgetting that it is always there. It is knowledge of the blind spot that keeps our acuity sharpened whenever we are switching lanes. As with the reality of accepting driver's-side blind spots, subjectivity not only is “always present” within the research process, but also in many cases promotes a deeper level of understanding of both research strategies and the subjects one is investigating.

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the African Studies Meetings in 19xx and the 1998 Getty Museum inaugural conference, Art/History. I wish to thank Kristina Van Dyke for her comments and help in shaping this essay and Mark Delancey for help with duplicating photos.

2. Cited in Obeyesekere's *Works and Lives*.



Figure 1. Photo of my parents, William S. Preston Jr. and Janet Clark Preston (on the right), and an unidentified couple taken at the Café Zanzibar, New York City.



Figure 2. Cover and frame of Figure 1 photograph from the Café Zanzibar.

Part I: A personal narrative—reflections on field research past and present

In 1969 after completing my sophomore year of college, I joined the Peace Corps. Student demonstrations were fermenting and calls were sounding loudly by my contemporaries for more “relevant” and “moral” avenues of life than the world of art and history, which I had been studying. With this in mind, I packed away my richly illustrated Western art-history books (along with the magnifying glass I had used in the Panofskyan iconographic analysis of that era) and deposited them in a back corner of my parents’ attic. Marrying my then boyfriend, Rudy, whose draft age made Peace Corps an even more critical choice, the two of us left New England to work in the ancient Yoruba city-state of Save in what is now the Republic of Benin. Yoruba art works are objects of striking beauty and sophistication, but I thought little about them then. The small city of Save, where we lived, was still suffering the effects of its devastating destruction by the Dahomey army a century earlier. The palace had been burned as a result of this violent encounter along with most of its art.

The Yoruba animosity toward the Dahomeans still living in the area was palpable. In some cases, arrogant Dahomey functionaries ran the schools where I was teaching and treated the local children and their parents with disdain. During the Peace Corps tour, I visited the Dahomey capital of Abomey and the palace of its once

bellicose kings. Local Dahomey guides leading groups through the palace grounds (many of them sons and grandsons of court ministers) paid great attention to Dahomey militarism and cruelty to their enemies, noting with awe and even pride the quantities of human blood from the bodies of slain prisoners of war, who had been used in the construction of palace shrines. If, at that time, I paid any attention to the women and men warriors who peopled the lively polychrome bas reliefs and appliques on the palace walls (fig. 8), I thought few positive thoughts. My memories of the extraordinary Fon courtly arts housed here were similarly evinced by the martial emphasis of the tour.

My parents came to visit us in Save in the second year of our stay, and together with my brother and sister, we traveled north to experience the quite different scenery and communities there. Along the way, we stopped at a Batammaliba village (or Somba as it was known there) with its fortresslike two-story houses of earth (fig. 10). The Batammaliba community that I saw struck me as a perfect homestead setting. Everything was in its place; each family was largely independent—politically and economically. Here, a strong sense of egalitarianism prevailed. Here, too, were people leading successful lives of the soil.

Batammaliba life then seemed to me very much like that in my home state of Vermont, or at least the myth that Vermonters like(d) to believe. Both sides of my family are centuries-long Vermonters, part of a culture that, in its own hyper-subtle way, is very chauvinistic.

Vermont natives historically have prided themselves on quiet reserve, hard work, social conscience, and common sense.³ My ancestors were farmers, small businessmen, mill owners, ministers, and teachers. Their aesthetic was one of simplicity; “good taste” was determined, in part, by the patina of age. This aesthetic interestingly is also a characteristic of many African art works, including those of the Batammaliba. My ancestral religion, Calvinism, with its privileging of discipline, order, and tradition also has a certain resonance with Batammaliba religious practice.⁴

As my two-year commitment with the Peace Corps came to a close, I began to think again seriously about art—about the fact that so little I had learned about this subject in Western art-history classes had relevance for what I had been seeing and experiencing in Africa. I decided at the end of Peace Corps that my larger mission in life would be to help reshape the discipline of art history in such a way that Africa (and its arts) would have a vital place in the academy (as well as in related texts and museum displays). The *Royal Arts of Africa* book that I recently published (Blier 1998) fits into this framework by insisting that key works of African art are/were associated both with complex political structures (on par with those of Europe) and with comparable historical contexts. Addressing the inherent biases of Western taxonomic systems has been another critical concern (1996a, 1993, 1990, 1988). My frequent engagement with theoretical issues coincides with this “mission” as well, for it is my belief that unless

we as African art historians enter into the larger theoretical debates that shape our field (while also remaining true to the essence of the works), the study of African art (and the works themselves—as well as their cultures) will continue to be marginalized.

While I was doing graduate work at Columbia University, my advisor, Douglas Fraser (who also was a key proponent of theoretical engagement), determined that I would do my doctoral dissertation on the architecture of the Batammaliba—the buildings I had visited with my parents several years earlier. I had briefly edited a film based on footage he had shot there. I also suggested the film’s title, “Out of Fire Comes Strength.” Today it seems to me not only to fit Batammaliba life but also to have a certain autobiographical “fit” suggesting the sometimes stern, fire-and-brimstone ancestry of my forebears.

I returned to Africa to complete my doctoral field work in 1976–1977 in the heyday of Levi-Strauss Structuralism. It was a time when scholars in many fields aligned with anthropology were looking for order, balance, and complementary dualisms. So was I. I saw in the architecture I was studying a symmetry and harmony of striking profundity. The Batammaliba created for themselves an architectonic, religious, and social system that worked integrally within itself (fig. 11). My dissertation and later book *The Anatomy of Architecture* (1987) reflected both my academic background and orientations at the time. One sees in this work a focus on order, balance, and social and political equilibrium, as well as an interest in the beauty and simplicity that this life and architecture afford its residents. Wanting to shape my research in a quite different way when it came time for writing and publishing this material, I tried to downplay the dualisms as much as possible and looked more closely at issues of ontology (hence the subtitle *Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*). For the observant reader, however, the incipient issues of Structuralism can still be felt. In many respects, I believe, the work is stronger for it.

Other autobiographical elements also impacted on my research in the Batammaliba area. As suggested above, in some ways the Batammaliba culture and setting resembled my own in northern Vermont. Not only was the physical area of the Batammaliba similar—mountains, broad vistas, and rugged terrain sporadically broken up by small communities of scattered farm-residences—but in this remote cultural landscape, there was also a strong sense of local reserve. Native residents

3. Although my family was somewhat “upper crust,” these values still applied.

4. Interestingly, Calvinists (or at least those in my family) also maintain key aspects of ancestor worship. A painting of my sister Betsy’s namesake, the plumpish and very down-to-earth-looking Betsy Leavenworth, hangs at the top of her stairs beside a framed piece of handwoven linen inscribed with the name of our four-times great grandmother. The portraits of two of our Preston ancestors, Uncle Adams and Aunt Jane, peer down sternly from the walls of my living room, much as they did in my parents’ house. Several old eighteenth-century settees, a secretary, and numerous chairs my mother’s family’s eighteenth-century homestead in Hinesburg, Vermont, that have been passed down generation to generation with words of caution about preserving this part of “our” past are scattered through my house as well. To me, these furnishings have a certain resonance with Asante, Dahomey, Bamun and other African stools that serve to visually fix (and hence preserve) history. Rudy (and our daughter Jocelyn) prefers our other dining room chairs; but the rough, prickly old rush seats of the old Hitchcock chairs are my first seating choice for sentimental and historic reasons.



Figure 3. Bas reliefs of Dahomey women warriors on walls of *adjalala* palace building of King Guezo (1818–1858). Abomey, Republic of Benin. February 1986.

were/are not exactly cold, but neither were they effusive. Whereas some researchers may have found this frustrating and off-putting, these were qualities that I had grown up with and respected. I believe that my research results were particularly rich in part as a result of this background. Autobiography impacted on other aspects of research as well. Early in life, I developed a heightened facility with humor as a means of countering the sometimes estranging residual Calvinist tenets of my upbringing. In a similar way, I learned to look for the “unusual” or “strange” within the Batammaliba cultural context. The practice of speaking to houses was one such example (Blier 1996b). Focusing on those things that seem off-putting or out of sync is a vital strategy whether involved in research or other serious matters.

Research “lacks” can also reflect autobiographical issues. I now realize that because I had come of age in the 1960s, during my dissertation research I paid little attention to Batammaliba militarism—though poison

arrows and shields are probably the best-known artifacts of the region in Western museums. This being the pre-postmodern era, I also barely mentioned the impact of German and then French colonialism on architecture and cultural institutions in the area, a subject that would be very interesting to explore now. My principal Batammaliba informants (research guides/sources) also tended to be my age.

Was *The Anatomy of Architecture* shaped by the period in which I was writing? Of course. Was this book defined by aspects of my own autobiography? In some respects, yes. Is what I wrote accurate with respect to the Batammaliba? I would also say yes, in large measure. Would I write the same thing today? Obviously no, although I think the differences would lie more in nuances than in broad strokes. Among other changes I would make, I would give the work a better title. Probably I also would have used the culturally inaccurate term *Tamberma* in discussing this tradition,

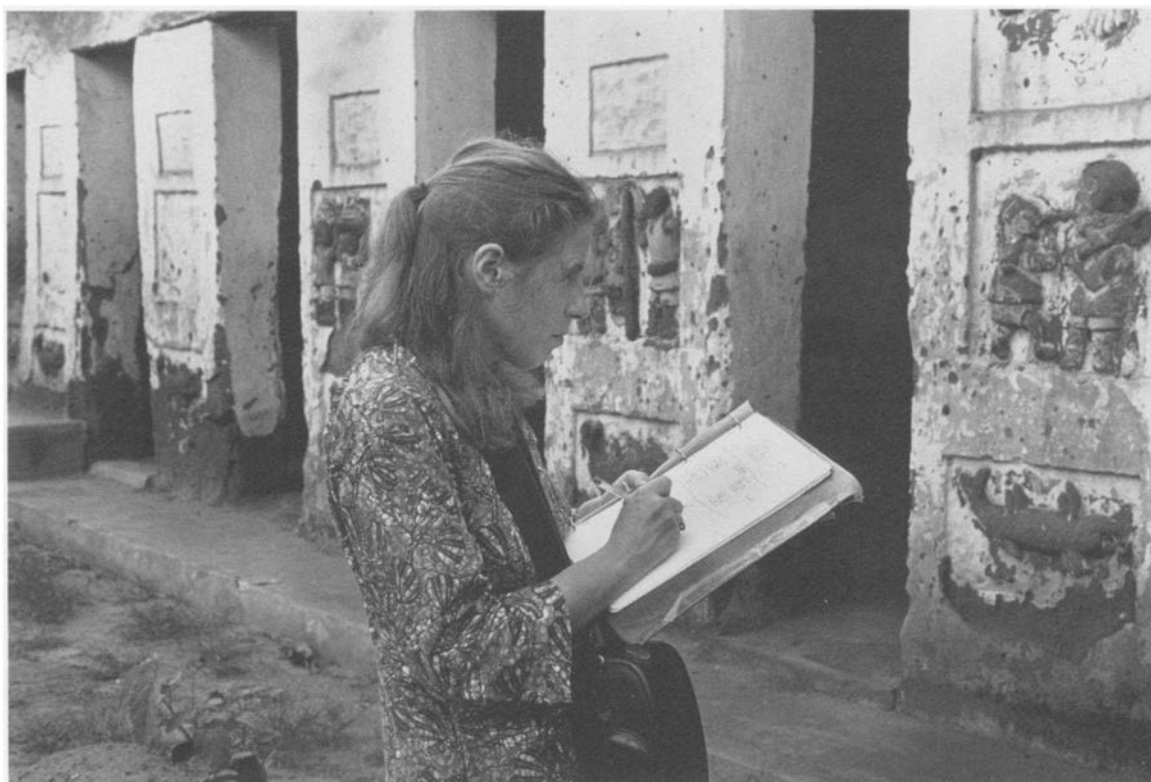


Figure 4. Author during fieldwork in Abomey analyzing bas reliefs on the *adjalala* of old Behanzin palace. Abomey, Republic of Benin.

because it continues to have more saliency. A chapter on Batammaliba building history, which I removed after readers suggested it didn't "fit" (see Blier 1984), would have been included as an addendum. The book thus would have had a fuller historical contextualization.

When I traveled to Africa eight years after my Batammaliba research to do field investigations for my second book, I selected a very different place (and culture), a setting as dissimilar to that of the Batammaliba as, say, Rome to Ghent. The cultural, architectural, and aesthetic divergences were staggering. Dahomeans are anything but reserved. (I found ten times the amount of research data.) People here talked on and on, about art and every other subject. Not surprisingly, my field notes also contain many contradictions based on the differing viewpoints of class and historical experience. This society was distinct not only from the Batammaliba but also from my experiences growing up. There was a strong sense of hierarchy, imperialism, and

elitism (fig. 12), and I had a difficult time adjusting to these aspects of the social milieu. As I look back on that research, I realize that my most effective sources were individuals who were outside the system. These included residents of rural communities, whose identities and family histories had been denigrated by the Dahomeans in the latter's ongoing thirst for expansion and control, as well as nonroyal ministers, whose families had been originally forced to come to the capital as prisoners of war (fig. 13). I also spent many hours interviewing descendants of early dynastic leaders and priests (fig. 14), who had been forced to the political or geographical periphery.

Thinking back on this research, I found it noteworthy that my principal sources on Dahomey art and history tended to be older than before. I had aged as well. Clearly, who I am (and was) impacted on how I have undertaken research. Perhaps because of my Vermont background, the most difficult events for me during this



Figure 5. Dahomey "Amazon" from Dr. Repin, "Voyage au Dahomey." *Le Tour du Monde* 7 (1863):96.

research were photographing pageants at the palace, documenting at close range the king, his wives, and members of the court (fig. 15). It was they, the royal family, who had to continually nudge me forward from the sidelines to get a better "shot." One-on-one research and photography was fine, as were private ceremonies, but in the spectacle and pageantry of the palace, I felt very ill at ease.

My first book on this material was focused on *bocio* (figs. 16–17)—small, emotionally powerful but aesthetically jarring sculptures that played an important part in personal protection. These are essentially popular arts that served as counterfoils to royal authority. In truth, I started with this material because I thought I could write a short article on them and then get on to what I thought would be more exciting subjects. At the same time, I was also deeply committed to understanding this commoner art form with respect to Dahomey imperialism. My *bocio* research and writing thus dovetailed not only with my long standing interests in the social history of art but also with a sense of

counter-elitism. (Not surprisingly, my adjustment to Harvard University has been, in its own way, as difficult as my adjustment to the princely classes of Dahomey). Like my study of the *bocio*, my book *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* was very personal in many respects, from its references to pregnancy and the birth of my daughter Jocelyn to the prominent psychological angle that I chose to follow in examining this material. Having been in therapy on several occasions, it was of both personal and intellectual interest for me to try to understand the psychoanalytic issues at play in the *bocio* works from the vantage of the Dahomey familial and sociopolitical experience. On reflection, perhaps this work too could have benefited from a different title, although its cross-cultural scope made the choice difficult, and in the end, the term *Vodun* had the singular advantage of both crossing these cultures and being a term of related religious experience that had a wider public saliency.

Part II: Thinking about theory through Louis Agassiz and John B. Perry

Of late, I have been turning my scholarly attention to the women warriors of Dahomey whose depictions enliven the palace walls of the Fon capital and serve as a backdrop for events at court—both past and present (figs. 3–4). This topic fascinates me for a variety of reasons, which, to some extent, have bearing on my own history. The main subjects of this research are women. And they are strong women (or at least were perceived to be—indeed, they were fighters [figs. 5–6]); like academics, their lives were defined by cycles of very challenging work followed by periods of brief repose. Like Africanist art historians, these "Amazons" were outsiders in the courts (departments) that they were serving.⁵ In researching viewer response to the

5. There is also another, more personal reason why I recently turned my attention to the arts of African "Amazons." My mother had been recently diagnosed with cancer. In Classical Greek portrayals, Amazons are identified by the loss of a breast, but the fact that my mother had breast cancer thirty-five years ago was less important to me than the realization that now I wanted to spend what little time I had left with her, in part, by learning from her about one of her lifelong interests, family history. If this history occasionally dovetailed with my research in Dahomey women warriors, particularly in the context of the latter's appearances in America during events such as the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, so much the better.



Figure 6. Dahomey "Amazons" during court ceremonies in the palace. Abomey, Republic of Benin. February 1986.

Dahomey "Amazons" who performed in this country and Europe from 1891 to 1901, I found that one of the best ways to locate period reactions to them was through the diaries of people who had attended associated events.⁶

After beginning my investigation at the Chicago Historical Society related to Amazon performances at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, I looked at my own family diaries. Among related works, I

6. In the same way that the diaries of turn-of-the-century European art viewers visiting sites on the "Grand Tour" are important to the construction of the field of art history as a discipline (in charting an emergent "cannon" of images and locating earlier viewer response), so too the intellectual travels that we as scholars take as we approach our subjects play a vital role in how we chose to discuss our subjects. Among the family artifacts that my sister Betsy set aside for me as she was sorting through the farrago of my parents' things was the 1901 diary of my great grandmother Janet Baxter Perry, written during a European trip she took as a young widow and companion for two young women on a European art-viewing pilgrimage. Memory traces

reread the diary of my great great grandfather, John Bulkey Perry (1825–1872), a Calvinist minister and scientist who lived in Vermont before moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts. While Perry had never seen the Dahomey women warriors, he taught paleontology at Harvard University under Louis Agassiz and worked at the Peabody Museum with George Putnam. The latter would organize the Midway ethnographic displays at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition at which the Dahomey Amazons figured prominently as a supposed "early human type." I first read Perry's diary at age 13 and was deeply impressed by the breadth of his intellectual interests and his self-discipline. Though he

of my great grandmother's Grand Tour no doubt partially predisposed me to art history over a variety of other fields. I had never seen these Grand Tour diaries before, but my mother knew of them, and so did my grandmother, who gave me a picture book showing the "10 most famous paintings of Europe" for my eighth birthday. For a long time, it remained one of my most prized possessions.

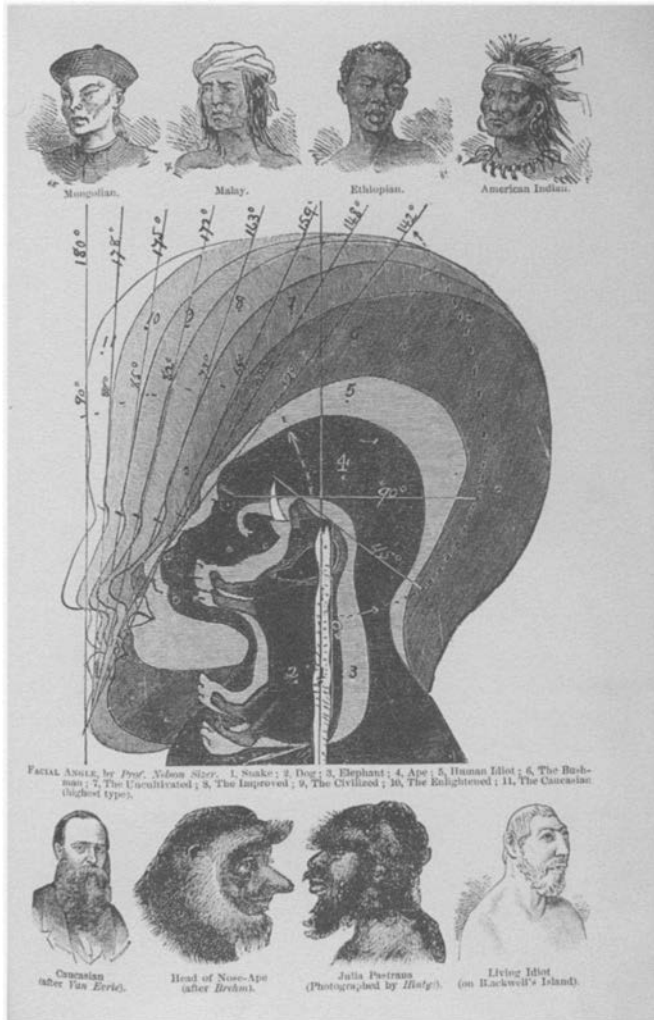


Figure 7. Evolutionary Diagram "Cranology" from Henry A. Mott, Jr., *Was Man Created?* (New York: Griswold, 1880), opposite p. 86.

graduated from the University of Vermont, Perry was largely self-taught and held strong beliefs about education for its own sake. This diary entry, dating from Perry's tour as a visiting teacher in the new American West after his graduation, demonstrates his resolve:

5:00–5:45 Bible study
 5:45–6:30 German
 10:00–10:30 French
 10:30–11:30 Greek
 11:30–12:00 Latin
 2:00–3:00 History, politics etc.

3:00–4:00 English poetry
 4:00–5:00 German
 5:00–6:00 Philosophy
 9:00–9:30 Bible⁷

So impressed was I with this entry upon reading it the first time that I adopted a similarly rigid program for myself. Abandoning my regular school assignments, I vowed over the course of the next three years to read every book in the school library – fiction and non-fiction, specialized and general works. Though my grades plummeted and I only made it to the letter *T*, I acquired a love of reading and thinking across a broad range of disciplines. Indeed, I believe my early encounter with Perry's diary had resonance in my choice of African art history, a field that necessitates moving continually across disciplinary boundaries—from philosophy to psychology, religion to medicine, from close language study to knowledge of the broad material bases of art. Undoubtedly, my deep-seated interest in the larger theoretical issues posed by African art relates to my early bibliographic interests as well.

When Perry returned from his tour, he attended Amherst Seminary, which afforded him the luxury of continued study. By the time he left to become a Congregational minister in Swanton, Vermont(?), he would know 12 languages, and his interests shifted to science during this period. He published some of the earliest studies of Native American archaeological sites in the area (1871) and did even more important research in the emerging (and then heatedly debated) field of geology and its sister field, evolution (Dann 1984, 2001).

But this work eventually brought him into conflict with the parish, and after being asked to resign, he worked as a traveling preacher and lectured where he could on the recent subject of his research, the then highly controversial Taconic question. One such lecture brought him to Boston before an audience of important local scientists. Among those in attendance was the famed scientist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), who offered Perry a position as his assistant in Paleontology at Harvard immediately following his talk.⁸

7. Also published in —"John Bulkeley Perry," "The History of the Town of Swanton" (1882).

8. Agassiz's biographer Jules Marcou, who lists Perry as Agassiz's last student, also notes that Perry's self-effacing nature and religious manner may have appealed to the very driven, and often conflictual, Agassiz, a number of whose former students and associates had

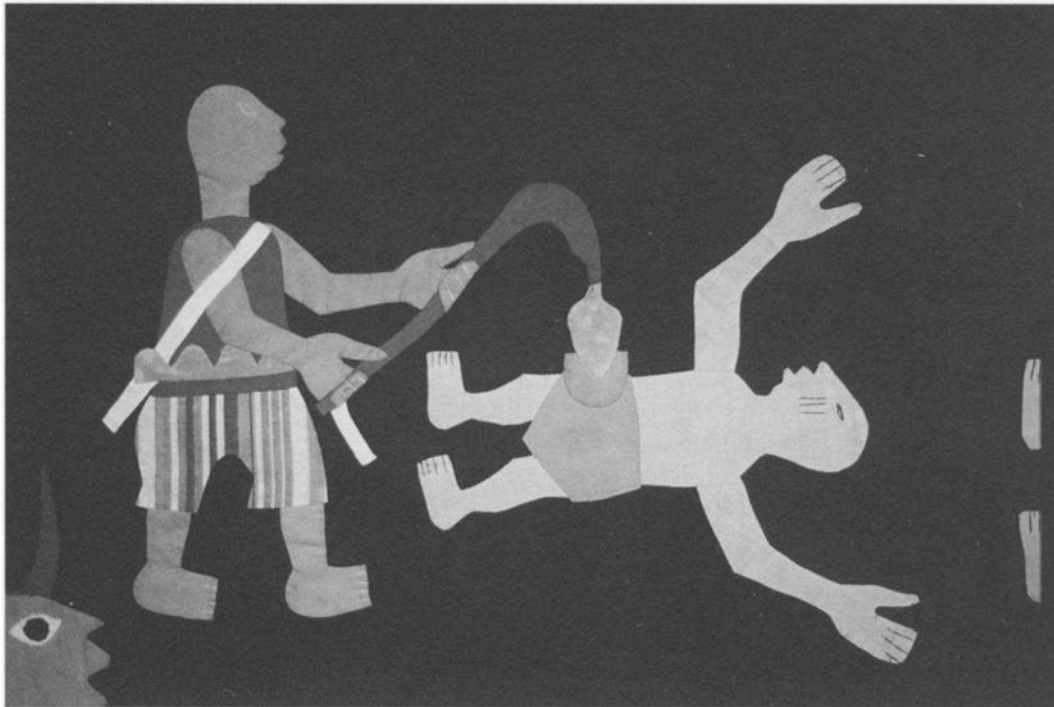


Figure 8. Detail of war scene in Glele applique, Musee Historique d'Abomey, Abomey, Republic of Benin. May 1986.

Social evolutionary theories in the nineteenth century played a central role in shaping racial stereotypes (fig. 7).⁹ In the course of investigating the issue of Western responses to the ethnographic performances of Dahomey women in this country, I examined class notes housed in the Peabody Museum archives of a student who had attended Perry's geology course in 1871. These class notes by J. H. Blake taught me little about Perry's views on social evolution (his lecture was a rather dry discussion of red sandstone), but the notes that followed in the student's course notebook outlined a lecture of enormous import by Professor Agassiz. The subject of Agassiz's classroom discussion was Darwin's scientific method.

recently left Harvard for other institutions because of disputes over evolutionary theory, publishing credit, and other matters. Perry was given responsibility for identifying and cataloguing many of the early fossils in the newly founded Peabody Museum; he was also put in charge of organizing a cataloguing system for the fledgling library.

9. African art historians deal with many of these same biases on a daily basis in classes, in advertisements, in museums, and with publishers.

Agassiz's insights on this subject over a century ago, I suggest, still have great saliency for art historians, anthropologists, and other scholars today. In the course of this lecture, Agassiz raised the issue of scholarly personality in scientific method (a concern related in many ways to reflexivity and autobiography). Mr. Blake's lecture transcription of that class on March 10, 1871, reads as follows:

The speaker [Prof. Agassiz] said that these remarks had been called out by reading Darwin's recent book *The Descent of Man*. He had read the book slowly and with attention. He had read it ready to agree with any and all of Darwin's conclusions if they should seem to him true: But his conclusions, deliberately formed, had been that either the first two chapters of the book were mere twaddle or he (the speaker) was an idiot. Prof. A. stated that this opinion was not the result of animosity toward Darwin himself for they were warm personal friends. Darwin was a good observer of the facts. . . . This difference then must be owing more to certain peculiarities of mind than to any other cause. How much of the difference between observers is owing to the facts and how much to the personal qualities of their minds?



Figure 9. Bronze Asen, Musee Historique d'Abomey (AD 45-8-90). Republic of Benin. August 1986.

Agassiz went on to discuss models of scholarly engagement based on the different ways that scientists come to their topics and points of view. Blake numerically outlined Agassiz's proposal of thinking:

- (1) Argument (in which argumentation rather than evidence is the decisive factor). According to Agassiz, Darwin was becoming increasingly this way.
- (2) Logical deductive (emphasizing deductive analyses of various sorts).
- (3) Mechanical or constructive modes.
- (4) Guessing (in Agassiz's view, some of the best scholarly work derives from guesswork).

(5) Sudden inspiration (As Agassiz explains, "some minds suddenly awake to knowledge of facts.")

(6) Men like himself (that is, Agassiz)—slow, patient, and self-abnegating.

Agassiz saw himself as essentially a receptor (and not necessarily a better one than other scientists of merit). No doubt it was from this vantage that Agassiz spent vast amounts of money (and time) on the collection of Peabody scientific artifacts from all over the world.

At this point in the class, Mr. Blake suggests, Agassiz conveyed an even more striking insight:

. . .all differences among scientific men upon one and the same subject were the results of mental dispositions and not from any differences in the things themselves. The only question is how much belongs to the writer and how much to the facts.

The last sentence of this comment is especially important because Agassiz is insisting that comparable credit must be given to the "writer" of a scientific track as to the material evidence ("facts") being discussed. Agassiz's argument is so modern—even postmodern—that it is hard to imagine it coming from Louis Agassiz, the preeminent nineteenth-century positivist. Although Agassiz would have been the last to argue for the inherent links between science and autobiography, he saw that critical research strategies necessarily are shaped by questions of self. Whether we immerse ourselves in the material evidence of the natural world or the largely visual evidence of art history, good scholarship is clearly more an "art" than a "science." Specifically, as art historians, our roles in many respects are as significant to the meaning of art as are the artists and patrons themselves. Each art work, in many respects, is recreated through the dynamic of its shifting art histories, and the vacillating voices of its scholars.

Theories of art have similarly competing operational strategies associated with them. What makes one theory more enduring or viable than another? How do we evaluate scholarship associated with a theory that has been disproven and/or replaced? Do problematic (disputed, outmoded) theories (and methodological orientations) necessarily lead to bad (untenable) analytic insights? These questions are as vital to traditionalist (mainly positivist) art scholars frustrated with what some may see as an endless parade of "new" art histories as they are to those scholars more actively engaged in the theoretical forays that define our own as well as other disciplines.

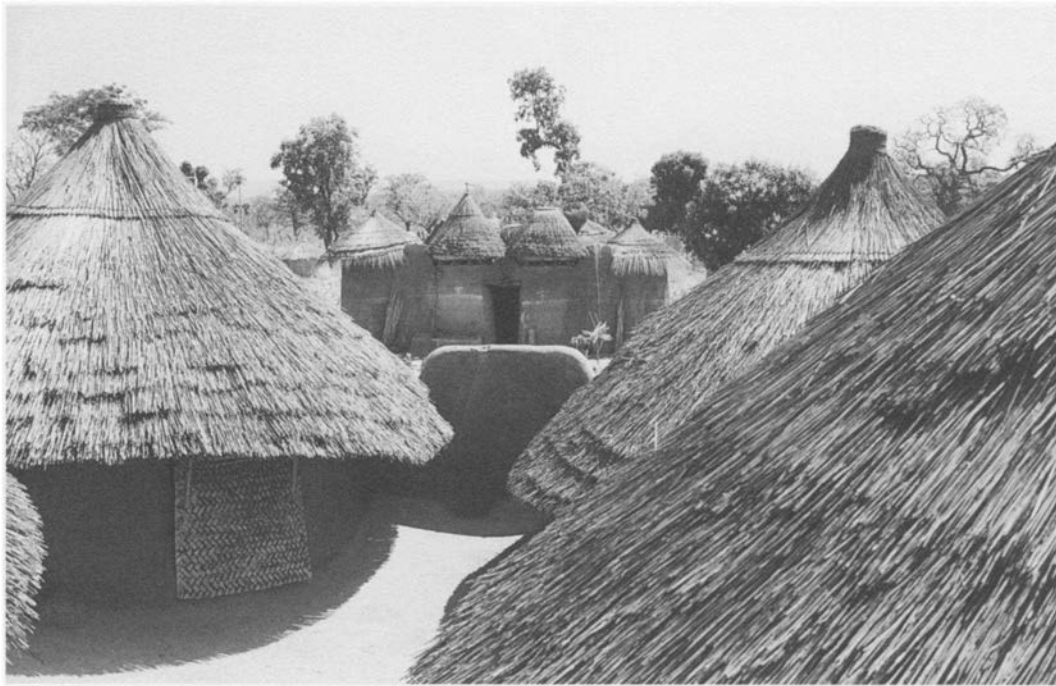


Figure 10. Terrace of a "Somba" house looking across to another structure. Natitingou. Republic of Benin. January 1971.



Figure 11. Batammaliba house. Koufitougou, Togo. February 1977

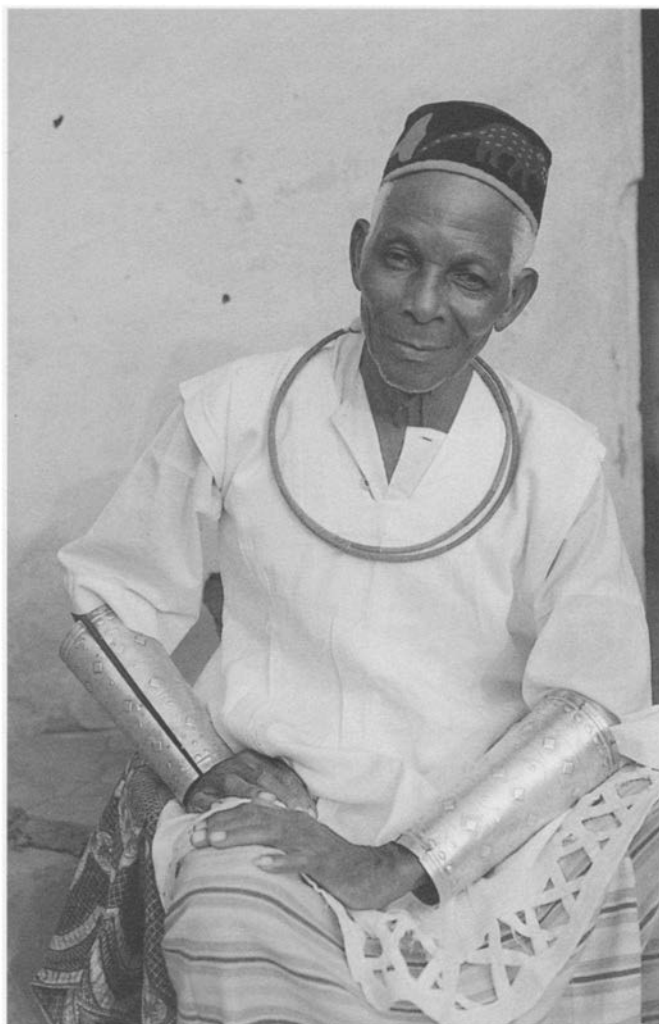


Figure 13. Dahomey Court Minister, Ajaxo. Abomey, Republic of Benin. July 1986.



Figure 14. Guedenon in ritual attire during a ceremony in Cana. January 1986.

Mary Douglas could easily have been talking about related methodological debates in her provocative essay "If the Dogon. . . ." (1967). The title of the essay refers to the Dogon of Mali, whose complex belief system (and related arts) were studied by the French symbolist anthropologist Marcel Griaule. (Griaule's surrealist influences, we recall, have more recently been discussed by James Clifford). Douglas argues (actually wonders) what view of the Dogon (and their art) we would have if this culture had been studied, not by Griaule, but rather by the British functionalist anthropologist Evans-Pritchard; and conversely how our

knowledge about the east African Nuer would differ if Evan-Pritchard's subjects (for whom we know a lot about quotidian life and economics and very little about religion and mythology) had instead been studied by Griaule. Douglas's unstated answer is that we would probably now view the Nuer artifacts as highly symbolized and Dogon works as more functional in orientation. Similarly, how different would our sense of African art history be if Robert Farris Thompson had decided to focus his recent attention on Mangbetu, and Enid Schildkrout had chosen instead to analyze Kongo visual forms. We would probably know Mangbetu art



Figure 15. Prince Langafin dancing at court ceremonies at the Dahomey Palace. Abomey, Republic of Benin. February 1986.

through its cosmograms, mythic meaning, dance parallels, and diaspora carry-overs (see for example Thompson and Cornet 1981), and Kongo art through ideas of colonial imperative, gender dynamics, and collection history (see Schildkrout and Keim 1990).

My intent here is not to address theoretical debates in regard to art-historical scholarship, but rather to suggest that related concerns constitute a ground against which it is insightful to examine epistemological dilemmas in the field more generally. To elaborate by way of a question: Are some theoretical tenets with respect to art indeed inherently “truer” (more sustainable) than others? Yes—and no. Clearly some theoretical orientations promote a greater wealth of path-forging scholarship. Structuralism serves as one example. In many fields of non-Western art—not only African, but also Native American, pre-Columbian, Oceanic, and ancient Near Eastern—Structuralism brought to the fore a number of groundbreaking studies.

Some of the best anthropology of art also grew from the nurturing embraces of Structuralism (see, among others, Bourdieu 1973, Fernandez 1977 and Vogel 1978). Although dualistic discourse is now officially defunct—overly simplistic, rigid, and indeed dualistic—when studying arts devoid of detailed written histories, Structuralism offered a range of provocative avenues of inquiry, which promoted profoundly interesting insights into art traditions in Africa. What should not be lost sight of in our praise of new (or old) methodologies is that, at its time, Structuralism afforded scholars the possibilities of approaching objects in ways in which they could not be approached before (and after).

“Deconstruction”/ “Postmodernism” (choose your label) presents a similar set of issues. In my view, the central tenets addressed within this larger theoretical discourse have been extraordinarily important to the field of art history, encouraging the study of a range of subjects, and indeed art forms, that could not be viably



Figure 16. *Bocio* from shrine in Abomey, Republic of Benin. June 1986.



Figure 17. *Bocio* in front of a house near Abomey, Republic of Benin. December 1985.

broached before—subjects concerned with colonialism, global markets, museum display practices, the impact of collecting expeditions, the role of art in resisting authority, issues of native response, even the “after-histories” of key works. The principal tenets of Deconstruction have also made it imperative that scholars define their positions in a more up-front manner. At the same time, however, I would be the first to admit that there is much in Deconstruction that is overly simplistic, rigid, and polemicized. Worse, as happened two to three decades earlier with Structuralism, Deconstruction today offers fewer

challenges to standard assumptions of “truth” than it once did because so many of its principal tenets are now accepted by both scholars and students. To put it another way, given a particular corpus of data, a sizable number of mainstream academics would approach the material in a somewhat similar way, by addressing larger issues of representation from the vantage point of power, bias, colonialism, race, or related difference. Equally important, the theoretical boundaries and parameters imposed by Deconstruction have increasingly become an all-too-heavy weight around the necks of key practitioners.

In treating photographs of naked native (or Western) women, for example, there is a growing acknowledgment that to some degree one is reinforcing the very denigrating view that we seek to condemn. Similar problems emerge in presenting images of racial stereotyping. Some art scholars indeed refuse to show the very arts they are examining. Deconstruction has other failings, among these its (admitted) nihilistic tendencies, and its emphasis on the "here," "now," and "me/we" for the understanding of the past or distant cultures—including autobiography. Some scholars have also displayed a proclivity for self-destruction in privileging the voice of a "generic" non-academically trained cultural "other" over the albeit often too authoritative voice of the academic specialist.

From the point of view of African art, Deconstruction has also encouraged a view of the continent that is largely monolithic, a place that was the disempowered (and unresponsive) recipient of the always-dominant West—or if engaged, necessarily responding to the outside rather than being self-motivated, proactive, uniquely creative. Moreover, because Deconstruction is (falsely) perceived to be relatively easy to "do," it has often lulled even the best of students into thinking that in-depth research is at once irrelevant and "wrong." Similarly, scholars from non-related fields (many themselves opponents of Deconstructive tenets) assume that by merely looking at issues of colonialism one can grasp and adequately cover the complex arts of Africa and important issues associated with them. (Why, in turn, some ask, should one hire a full-time Africanist art historian when one can cover colonialism in the general survey.) If, due in part to its own extraordinary success today, the death of Deconstruction as we know it as a dominant intellectual paradigm already is at hand, this does not mean that related scholarship necessarily needs to be debunked. The new pathways that have been opened up in the last two decades no doubt will remain open. And the view of art that postmodernism has offered no doubt will also remain as "true" (tenable) as other earlier theories in the fray.

By way of conclusion, if "stories" (histories—art histories, artist histories, collection histories, social histories, ritual histories, colonial histories) and their recounting through various forms of narrative can be said to constitute a critical focus of art-historical analysis, and I think they do, we must also consider the role that self-histories play in the construction of related discourses. And, if we can except the impact of our own

stories (for better or for worse, and due in great measure to happenstance) in the construction of knowledge (and here I include native-speaking scholars along with others), must we not also agree that the lenses offered by particular theoretical perspectives (in both their positive and negative attributes) necessarily also remain a vital part of the self-history of art, even when such theories are *depassé*, or as is equally often the case, filled with as many problems as provocative vistas of academic insight. In the end, all approaches to art necessitate a certain degree of peripheral vision, which at once obscures certain features but offers in exchange the potentiality of seeing things from new angles.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blier, Suzanne Preston

- 1998 *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. Calmann and King, London and Abrams/Prentice Hall, New York.
- 1996a "Enduring Myths of African Art," in *Africa: The Art of a Continent: 100 Works of Beauty and Power*, pp. 26–32. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
- 1996b "Ritual," in *Critical Terms in Art History*, ed. Robert Nelson and Richard Schiff, pp. 187–196. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 1995 *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 1993 "Truth and Falsehood: Fetish, Magic, and Custom in European and African Art," in *Africa and the Disciplines*, ed. Robert H. Bates, Valentin Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, pp. 139–166. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 1990 "African Art at the Crossroads: An American Perspective," in *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline*, pp. 91–107. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1988 "Words about Words about Icons: Iconology and the Study of African Art." *College Art Journal* 47:75–87.
- 1987 *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- 1984 "Towards a History of Tamberma Two Story Architecture: Origins, Impetus, and Factors of Change." *Iowa Studies in African Art* 1:115–134.

Bourdieu, Pierre

- 1973 "The Berber House," in *Rules and Meanings*, ed. Mary Douglas, pp. 98–110. Penguin, New York.

-
- Dann, Kevin T.
1984 "John Bulkey Perry and the "Taconic Question."" *Earth Sciences History* 3 (2):153–159.
2001 *Lewis Creek Lost and Found*. University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire.
- Douglas, Mary
1967 "If the Dogon . . ." *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 28:659–673.
- Fernandez, James
1977 *Fang Architectonics*. Working Papers in the Traditional Arts, no. 1. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia.
- Leach, Edmond
1989 Review of Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives* in *American Ethnologist* (February).
- Marcou, Jules
1896 *Life, Letters and Works of Louis Agassiz*. Macmillan and Co., New York.
- Marcus, George E., and Fred R. Myers, eds.
1995 *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath
1990 *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Perry, John B. Rev.
1871 "The Natural History of the Counties Chittenden, Lamoille, Franklin, and Grand-Isle," in *Vermont Historical Gazetteer and Biographical Magazine*, ed. Abby Maria Hemenway, vol. 2, no. 12, pp. 21–89. A. M. Hemenway, Burlington, Vermont.
- "Perry, John Bulkey"
1882 Extracts from *The Congregational Quarterly* in *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*. Part 2, "The History of the Town of Swanton," ed. A. Hemenway, p. 985. A. M. Hemenway, Burlington, Vermont.
- Repin, Dr.
1863 "Voyage au Dahomey." *Le Tour du Monde* 7:65–110.
- Schildkrout, Enid, and Curt A. Keim
1990 *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Thompson, Robert Farris, and Joseph Cornet
1981 *The Four Moments of the Sun*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- Vogel, Susan
1978 "Art and Politics: A Staff from the Court of Benin, West Africa." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 13:87–100.