Accumulating Histories

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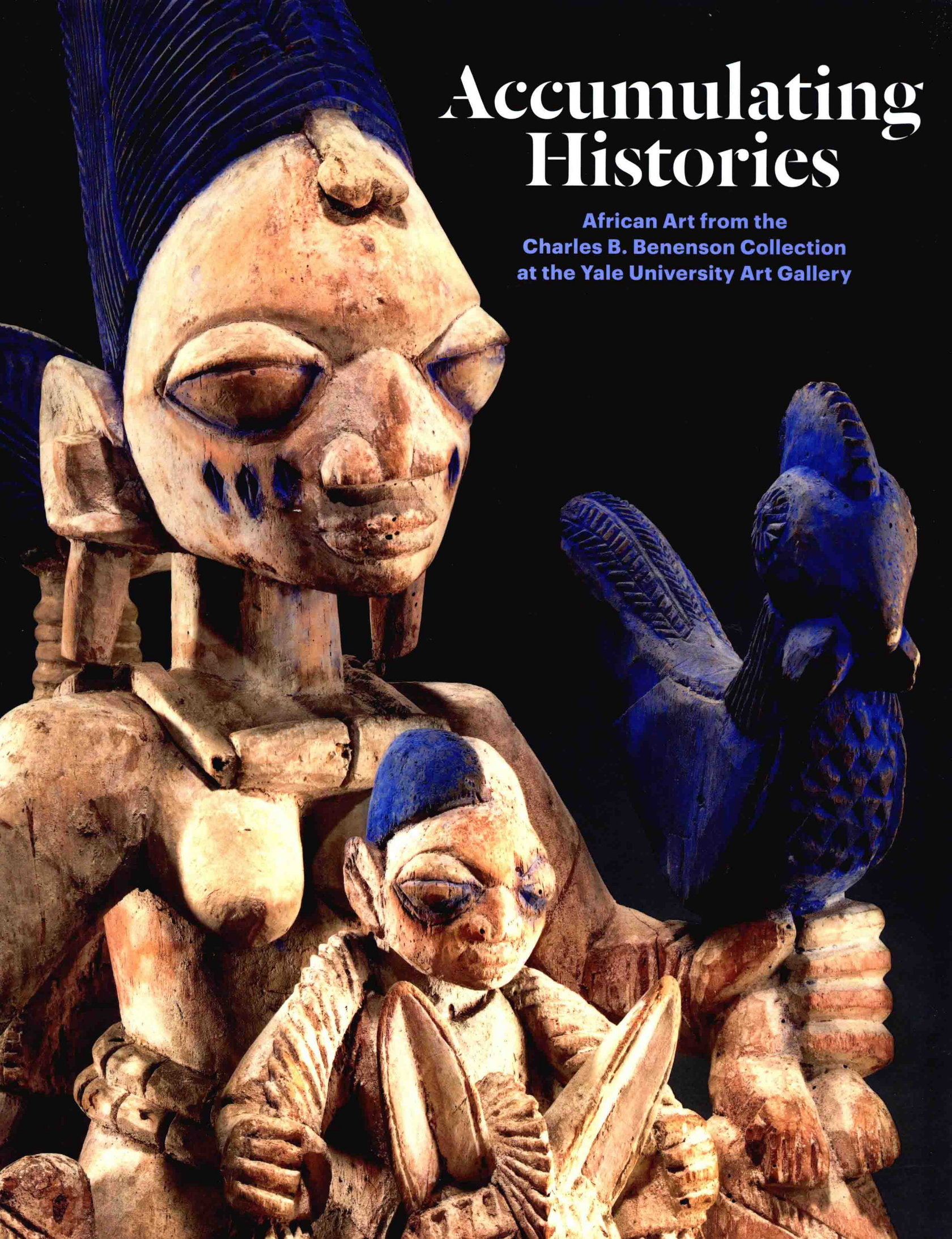

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Frederick John Lamp, Amanda M. Maples, and Laura M. Smalligan

with essays by Michael Kan and Susan Vogel

Yale University Art Gallery
New Haven

Distributed by Yale University Press
New Haven and London

Publication made possible by an endowment created with a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support provided by Bruce W. Benenson, Frederick Benenson, and Lawrence B. Benenson in memory of their father, Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933.

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Director's Foreword

African art has a venerable history at Yale University, beginning with the gift of more than 150 objects from the collection of Ralph Linton, purchased and donated by Mr. and Mrs. James M. Osborn from 1954 through 1976. The first classes in African art history at Yale were taught by Professor Robert Farris Thompson beginning in 1964, initiating a well-led learning tradition for thousands of undergraduates that continues to the present day. The Council on African Studies and the Yale community of Africanists span departments, schools, and residential colleges throughout the University, and its library holdings in African studies are among the best in the world. So it was indeed fitting that one of the most respected private collections of African art extant in America, built up over more than three decades by Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, should in time come to the Yale University Art Gallery.

Mr. Benenson's gift of 585 African artworks, made in 2002–4 while he was serving actively on the Gallery's Governing Board, enabled this teaching museum to at last formally establish a full department of African art, for it was also Mr. Benenson who endowed the department's first senior curatorship, a position now held by Frederick John Lamp, the Frances and Benjamin Benenson Foundation Curator of African Art. Fred Lamp's ties to Yale are strong, too; Fred had served in the Peace Corps in Africa, beginning a lifelong engagement with the African people. He began his field research while at the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., subsequently becoming Robert Farris Thompson's doctoral student at Yale. Completing his PH.D. in 1982, he continued his research in Africa while serving as the curator of African art at the Baltimore Museum of Art before returning to his alma mater in 2004.

Since 2006 the rotating installations of African art from the Gallery's permanent collection now on view in the Laura and James J. Ross Gallery of African Art, located within the recently renovated Louis Kahn building, have been a major attraction for Yale's community of students and professors, local K–12 school classes, and public visitors. These ongoing displays that Fred creates with his colleagues are stunning and transport visitors to another time and place of wonder and beauty. Spacious and light-filled, the visually poetic installations provide intimate encounters with a wide array of original works of African art, which are often suggestively "re-placed" in their original context through the use of field photographs that document ritual performances and daily life. Beginning with the reopening of the reinstalled Kahn galleries in December 2012, masterpieces drawn from Benenson's bequest of his renowned modern and contemporary art collection will be regularly rotated into the newly named Charles B. Benenson Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. Visitors to this teaching museum will be inspired by the rich visual interplay of artworks that Benenson, with a great and relentless passion, accumulated across these two broad-based arenas of collecting.

As I sat in the Temple Emanu-El in New York for the celebration of "Charlie" Benenson's good and long life on February 27, 2004, in the company of his family members and hundreds of his friends and associates, I was privileged to learn for the first time the full scope of this fine man's exceptional generosity and thoughtfulness. Charlie's life exemplified the great Judaic tradition of *tzedakah*, which, in Maimonides's famous formulation, reserves highest praise for those whose charitable activity is self-effacing, even anonymous. Charlie Benenson was one of America's most successful real-estate developers, known for his keen intuition for a good deal and fair and honest business practices. In his eulogy for this distinguished alumnus, Yale's president, Richard C. Levin, used the occasion to laud Charlie's generosity as well as his sage advice as one of the founding members of the University's Real Estate Committee. It was in this capacity that Charlie helped Yale make the best investment yet in its long history, the purchase and eventual sale of 717 Fifth Avenue in New York. "Think of it this way," President Levin said, "Thanks to Charlie, Yale has the capacity to support an additional four hundred Yale College scholarship students each year in perpetuity!"

Charlie's great business sense also guided him in the development of his African and modern and contemporary art collections. He was quick and certain to make an acquisition if an artwork genuinely pleased his eye and mind, and he was always willing to host students, curators, faculty members, and me for visits to his home to view his collection. He also readily lent artworks to multiple exhibitions at the Gallery, and as a member of our Governing Board and its Collection Committee since 1991, he never failed to take the time to offer swift and astute

advice in responding to the Gallery's numerous acquisition proposals. He was an avid reader, too, and took a great delight in the Gallery's publications, especially those that enabled young scholars to place their work in print for the first time.

I well remember paying my first visit to meet Charlie and his devoted wife Jane at their beautiful home in Greenwich, Connecticut, shortly after I assumed the directorship of the Gallery in 1998. I was immediately charmed by the warmth of the friendly couple, and as Charlie gave me a tour through his home and his vast additional backyard gallery building and sculpture garden, he carefully spent hours introducing me to the myriad artworks that would someday be coming to Yale. He did so in a quiet and unassuming manner I was soon to know well, often with a good story at hand, and always with a twinkle in his eye. When I sought to thank him for his remarkable generosity, he quickly changed the subject, not wanting to dwell upon his benevolent intentions. Instead, he wanted to hear from me about the planning underway for renovating and expanding the Gallery so that there could be more opportunities for students to engage with original works of art. His own passion for such engagement was evident everywhere around us as we walked and talked, and I was deeply taken by Charlie's passion for art and learning, his personal humility, and his extraordinary generosity. With this beautiful book all of us here at Yale wish to celebrate Charlie's legacy, one that will perpetually enrich his beloved alma mater and help to expand the central teaching mission of the Yale University Art Gallery.

Jock Reynolds
The Henry J. Heinz II Director
Yale University Art Gallery

Acknowledgments

When the Department of African Art proposed a catalogue of the Yale University Art Gallery's Charles B. Benenson Collection that would be a bit unorthodox—a very personal study of the collector and his family and acquaintances, rather than an art-historical study of the objects—we took a great risk. There was skepticism. Why not simply invite specialists to contribute focused essays on the art, in the traditional manner of catalogues? Are the lives of collectors interesting enough? Would we be able to identify previous owners of the objects? And if we did, were these owners still alive, would their memories still serve them, and would they be willing to put their thoughts into a narrative on the history of their interactions with others over decades in the African art market?

With Amanda M. Maples, Research Assistant; Laura M. Smalligan, Graduate Research Assistant and a doctoral recipient in the history of art at Yale; and Kristen Windmuller, a bursary student in the department who graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2008, I began tentative inquiries, little by little reaching further and wider, and eventually getting in touch with people whose names, even to me with my decades of experience in this field, were almost mythical. Amanda and Laura, who did most of the interviews, were relentless and indefatigable in their search, and their extraordinary charm served them well in interviewing the cast of characters whose lives intersected with Benenson's in the trade—a group renowned for some difficult personalities, to be charitable, although many turned out to be as delightful as could be. I cannot praise Amanda and Laura enough for their ability to get people to open up and to enjoy this process.

Elizabeth Solak, Museum Assistant in the Department of African Art, worked tirelessly to get the cataloguing data in order with consistency and pragmatic rationality. I thank her for her contribution in compiling the indexes of the exhibition history, provenance, and cultures of the objects, as well as the catalogue of objects, with media, dimensions, provenance, exhibitions, and publications of each object.

A great aid in our research has been the Yale University Art Gallery-van Rijn Archive of African Art, compiled by Guy van Rijn over several decades. With his background in African art dating to his work with his father, Lode van Rijn, a dealer in Amsterdam, van Rijn provided invaluable assistance with the vetting of the objects in this catalogue, as well as with determining their provenance and histories of sale. He has also been instrumental in sharing his vast network of contacts in the world of the art market, a coterie that is sometimes difficult to penetrate from the outside. His assistants, Bruno Claessens and Frederic Cloth, have been magnanimous in helping us track down details in collection history.

We would especially like to express our gratitude to the Benenson family—Charles Benenson's wife, Jane, and sons, Bill, Fred, and Lawrence—for their enthusiastic support of this project and its process. Through interviews, family members helped portray intimately their beloved Charlie's lifetime devotion to art and fascination, in particular, with African art that they, too, connected with in one way or another.

Lawrence has graciously made available a treasure trove of documents and photographs covering Charlie's life. I am grateful for his significant input to the success of this book through providing information, checking details, and editing at each step of the way.

The production of the catalogue involved a great many people at the Gallery. The bulk of the catalogue—the stunning photographs that bring out the best in the objects—is the artistry of Anthony DeCamillo, Senior Photographer, working over three years, meticulously, to accomplish this documentation. Thanks also go to John ffrench, Director of Visual Resources, and Richard House, Senior Photographer, for their guidance of the photography project. The book could not have been produced as beautifully as it is without the meticulous work of our editorial and graphics departments, especially Tiffany Sprague, Director of Publications and Editorial Services; Bryne Rasmussen, Administrative Assistant; Stacey Wujcik, Editorial Assistant; and Christopher Sleboda, Director of Graphic Design. This group, always capable of turning a gnarled sow's ear into a lovely silk purse, has consistently turned out magnificent publications for the Yale University Art Gallery.

Frederick John Lamp
The Frances and Benjamin Benenson Foundation Curator of African Art
Yale University Art Gallery

Foreword

My father began collecting African art in the early 1970s. There are interesting stories regarding almost all of his 585 pieces. His first piece was a big Cameroon mask that he saw in the window of a gallery on Madison Avenue. He was transfixed by its monumentality and power. His second piece was an Ibibio headdress. The third piece he bought . . . just kidding! After his first two pieces there was such a flood of accumulation not even he remembered the order!

Charlie Benenson loved modern art, contemporary art, and African art. In his day job, he was a visionary real-estate entrepreneur who perceived opportunities long before many other businessmen. Fortunately, he had great courage and acted on those ideas. The same was true as an art aficionado.

When he began buying African art he had little competition for the best pieces. Word spread rapidly of his accessibility, his willingness to look at everything and his quick, almost unerring, eye.

In the early days of his collecting African art, he was advised as to the objects' authenticity by Michael Kan. Then he met Susan Vogel. She became his second-most-trusted advisor, and in the early 1980s she and my father created what is now the Museum for African Art.

My father was his own most trusted advisor. If Susan liked a piece and he didn't, he could not be persuaded to buy it. If he liked a piece, but Susan questioned its veracity, he sometimes bought it anyway. As in real estate, his African art buying was instinctive. His decisiveness was legendary and he was a hero among dealers for many reasons, not least of which was his immediate bill paying.

Dealers would land at JFK airport, get in taxis, and bring their duffel bags filled with sculptures and tattered wrapping paper straight to his workplace. It was quite a scene.

Sulaiman Diane, an art dealer from Guinea, wrote a euology for Charlie that perfectly captured the emotional reasons for which the African runners and dealers adored him:

> For us he was more than a friend and a customer. He was a man of love, compassion, who received and welcomed each of us as his friends and children. He had tremendous knowledge of and respect for our culture. We called him the "junky [*sic*] of African art."
>
> He loved African art like an addiction. He touched many Africans by acquiring works of art from us. He helped us help our families back home who depend on us. . . . He had love, compassion, humility, care, and understanding of his fellow man. Our background, our skin color made no difference to him.

My father was democratic. It was all about the art. For a couple of years Dad and I shared an office. After the renovation of our work premises I moved into my own office. One day my father said to me, "When are you going to get your pieces out of my office?" I had no idea he had bought me a starter set of seven pieces! I was very excited and that began my infection with "the bug."

Why African art? My father loved the sculptures. The people who made these sculptures created them out of their love for beauty and tradition and for carving representational figures. The objects my father bought were different than the art with which he was familiar. African art provided him with boundless fascination for the rest of his life.

Charlie Benenson's collection of African art is easily one of the top twenty collections ever assembled. It is definitely the best collection of African art of someone who never set foot in Africa.

The purpose of this catalogue is to illustrate the breadth and depth and absolute dynamism of Charlie Benenson's collection. The book you are holding would have made my father blush, but he would have been glad for you to see pictures of the sculptures he loved.

Lawrence B. Benenson

Preface

"The history of African art in the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, is only partly situated in the original African context, and partly (if not mostly) in the context of the Western collection and the Western marketplace." These were the parting words in my previous book, *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art*, a work devoted entirely to the other side of the history of African objects—the African performance context largely of the past.[1] We now turn to the present—that is, the recent century, or half-century, as the case may be. Museum collections and their displays represent less a history of African art than a history of the collecting of African art—the aesthetic choices, the emotional response, the manipulation of the original form, and a particular understanding of the field. In 1988, in an address to the African Studies Association, Monni Adams, of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, lamented that "there is a neglect of research on collections. . . . Museum collections offer important opportunities for historical insight."[2] Since then, the attention of the field of African art scholarship has turned decidedly toward this context, as the windows on doing field research on the original context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African forms are closing, the flow of this art (essentially before the independence of African countries, in 1957–61) from Africa to the international market has all but dried up, existing collections are constantly being mined to fill the demand for African art, and writing—from senior essays to PH.D. dissertations to museum catalogues—is focusing on the history of collections. Paula Girshick cited several publications in a 2010 review that reflect "the recent awakening of interest in the history of collecting and the lives and artistic concerns of individual collectors."[3]

In the same vein, just as the subject of "traditional" or older African art is now more studied outside the continent of Africa, contemporary African art is produced largely in New York, Paris, and London, where it also can best be studied. Venues for the presentation of African art, whether publications or exhibitions, often expand the boundaries to include work from the diaspora and from new frontiers such as white South Africa or the Arabic North. The definition of Africa itself is a contested intellectual exercise.

The collecting of African art for display in the home or in public institutions is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, although, in Europe, the royal "cabinets of curiosities" from the seventeenth century onward are well known, and some of the earliest collected objects can be found at the Museum of Ulm in Germany. One of the earliest museum collections in the United States is that of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, into which African items began to trickle in the 1860s due to the private maritime trade, in which American sailors went all over the world and began to bring back mementos of their journeys, unlike their European predecessors, who apparently had little interest in doing so. The interaction of European modern artists with African art in the beginning of the twentieth century in Paris began to elevate these objects from artifacts to art. By the 1960s modern art had begun to shift its center to New York, and so did African art. Today, Western collectors and African intellectuals often express the same sentiment: that "African art" (by which they refer to ritual and utilitarian forms meant for indigenous use, vaguely predating the 1960s and the onset of globalism) can be found no longer in Africa, but rather in Europe and America. The timeline included in the present publication attempts to give a picture of the developments in the twentieth century that contributed to the kind of fascination with African art that drove such collectors as Charles B. Benenson.

Current trajectories in museums and scholarly publications of African art are not only toward reflexivity and examining the way we interpret art in Western gallery and museum settings, but also toward the circulation of the objects themselves, the history of collecting, collectors, and the market. Exhibitions such as *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, in 1984, reexamined the impact of museum display. As Peter Stepan has noted, "The MoMA show provoked not only criticism of the basic proposition of the exhibition but led to a re-consideration of museum culture in the west as a whole."[4] Examples of reflexive historicity are aptly handled in exhibitions and publications such as *ART/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (1988), at the Center for African Art, New York, which focused on the psychology behind displaying objects, whereas other exhibitions, such as the renamed Museum for African

Art's *Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art* (1994) took the design approach, viewing exhibitions from the standpoint of the object and the museum space itself. The Yale University Art Gallery exhibition *Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation* (2009) also went behind the scenes, focusing on the complexities of conservation of a selection of African and other art objects. Even more recently, the Detroit Institute of Arts' *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present* (2010) aptly illustrated the shift from Western views of Africans and so-called primitives to the African perspective, not only examining the museum's role, the artist's role, and the function of the Western gaze in the appreciation of African art, but also looking at the African voice and view itself—in a way, exploring how Africans, in turn, exoticize Westerners.

In the film *Fang: An Epic Journey*, presented by Susan Vogel as a thesis for her film program in 2001, an African art object—a reliquary figure from the Fang of Southern Cameroon in the Benenson Collection—takes a journey from its home within the ancestral ritual of the Fang people and finds itself in the hands of a wide variety of people, including colonial officials and European dealers, until it rests finally in a private collection. The object is now in the Yale University Art Gallery's collection (2006.51.102). The Fang figure, like most African art in American collections, was probably made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. When we think of the enormous volume of African art objects in American private collections, many of which then migrate to American public collections, we have to be struck by the fact that most of these objects—now, in the twenty-first century—have spent the better part of their lives in America, not Africa, and in the company of people with their own agendas, which may or may not correspond in any way with the agendas of the original makers and owners.

For a long time now—in many cases for a century or more—these objects have not felt the air and sunlight of southern Nigeria or the Swahili Coast. They have not felt the warm sacrifice of goat's blood, millet spittle, or eggs, or sat together with attendant bottles of palm wine, basins of water, or plates of eggs and beans on an African shrine. They have not increased in size or changed their shapes with the continual accumulation of spiritually powerful mud, clay, and herbs, or absorbed the smoke of a kitchen fire below their hiding place. They have not been refurbished for annual performance, reblackened, repainted, or refreshed, or dressed with new clothes or jewelry. They have not been held aloft in the air by a devotee in trance, worn on the face, sat upon in a state occasion, or fondly rubbed with oil to enliven them.

These objects have had other uses and other experiences. For the past century, they have felt the caresses of their mystified American and European owners, they have sat on pedestals on Madison Avenue or the rue de Seine, they have been dusted by countless maids, and some have been polished with cleaners and furniture oil. Many have been stripped not only of their accoutrements but, in some cases, particular details of the carving or painted surfaces. Others have been restored, repaired, embellished, endured makeovers, made more primitive, made less primitive, altered to match the décor, and so on. They have been fitted for armatures by a famous Japanese sculptor, flown around the world from Douala to Paris to San Francisco to New York, back to Paris for the Parcours des Mondes, packed and unpacked, packed and unpacked. They have endured the dry heat of New York radiators in the winter and the dry cool of air-conditioned New York summers. They have suffered the glare and heat of photography lights. It's enough to make a figure weep (see, for example, 2006.51.221).

The Western owners' understandings of the African objects may be completely different from those of the previous African owners but still reflect a love and appreciation as intense. The African objects perform an important function for their collectors, and they can be objects of affection, instruments of prestige and social negotiation, a rallying point for social interaction, the subject of arguments and source of alienation among family and friends, the focus of litigation, the site of enormous personal pleasure, and the media of barter and trade.

The evolving use of many African art forms in twenty-first-century America brings the discussion into the global marketplace: some forms have taken on new functions as black icons (such as the Baga D'mba, the Asante Akua'ba, or Akan strip-woven cloth), as promotional gimmicks, as monuments of modernism (Kota reliquary figures, the Bamana Chi Wara), or as agents of postmodernism (Bamana mudcloth, for instance, as fashion) and globalism. The ownership

of this cultural property is contested. Even to many Bamana today in Mali, Chi Wara is no longer the wooden headdress their ancestors knew, but the title of their best farmer. Chi Wara also belongs to an airline, Air Mali, as its logo. The Kente strip-weave pattern belongs to the liturgical effects of the black American church. Shango, the Yoruba god of lightning and thunder, is a bar in New Orleans, an online motorcycle-products market, a downloadable word-processing font, and a brand of bath crystals. The history of African aesthetics resides very clearly in an international context, as much outside of Africa as within.

In *See the Music, Hear the Dance*, the focus was the performance context of African art in a particular collection, emphasizing the multisensory aspects of these objects in the indigenous experience, something that cannot be adequately felt in a gallery or a private home display. The central question was this: How did the original artists and owners see and feel these art forms? In the present catalogue, on the other hand, there is no African voice, just the voices of those living in the United States and Europe, dealing in art with very little understanding of the original ritual context or complex cultural thought underlying the creation of the works they sell. There is no African exegesis of the meanings of these works, but only the impressions of Western owners and observers. There is no African ethnography by which we examine the cultural foundations of resulting forms. Here we ask, what is the meaning and significance of the objects to collectors, and how do they feel the presence of these objects?

Frederick John Lamp
The Frances and Benjamin Benenson Foundation Curator of African Art
Yale University Art Gallery

Notes

1 Frederick John Lamp, ed., *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2004), 282.

2 Monni Adams, "African Visual Arts from an Art Historical Perspective," *African Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (1989): 81.

3 Paula Girshick, review of *Material Journeys: Collecting African and Oceanic Art, 1945–2000*, by Christraud M. Geary and Stephanie Xatart, H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews (October 2010), https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23484 (accessed October 2010).

4 Peter Stepan, *Picasso's Collection of African and Oceanic Art: Master of Metamorphosis* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2006), 27.

Timeline

1883–1930
Detroit Institute of Arts begins collection of African art with contributions from Frederick Stearns, Robert Tannahill, and others; among the pieces are several Benin royal bronzes.

1906
"Primitive art" is elevated to the status of "Art" after being "discovered" by modern artists. Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso make their first purchases of African art; all become interested in so-called Negro art.

1909
Guillaume Apollinaire is one of the first writers to appreciate aesthetic qualities of "primitive" art; encourages its exhibition at Musée du Louvre, Paris. He laments that up until that point, these works had been admitted only into ethnographic collections, which saw them as vulgar curiosities or, at best, objects of documentation.

1914
Alfred Stieglitz presents first exhibition of African art in the United States at his Photo Secession Gallery, New York.

1915
First book-length study of African art, *Negerplastik* by Carl Einstein, is published in Leipzig by Weissen Bücher.

1919
Joan Miró first sees "primitive" art in Pablo Picasso's studio.

1920s–30s
New Negro Movement, or Harlem Renaissance, is championed by the highly influential Alain Locke. Locke's writing sought to provide African Americans with a sense of cultural history and pride. Locke encouraged artists, scholars, and intellectuals to study and interpret African art seriously and theoretically, on the same plane as other art.

1920
Brooklyn Museum (then the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences) begins to build collection of African art, under leadership of Stewart Culin, museum's first Curator of Ethnology, with acquisitions from W. O. Oldman in London, György Zala in Budapest, Paul Guillaume in Paris, and François Poncelet in Brussels.

1920
Groundbreaking *Negro Sculpture* exhibition opens at the Chelsea Book Club, New York.

1921
African art is further elevated to status of contemporary art by being prominently displayed at the Thirteenth International Exposition of Art in Venice (precursor to Venice Biennale).

1923
Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo exhibition opens at the Brooklyn Museum (then the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences); first exhibition of African art in an American museum.

1925
The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania, is founded by chemist and collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes to display Impressionist and Postimpressionist European and American paintings, as well as more than one hundred African sculptures purchased from Paul Guillaume in Paris.

1926
Primitive Negro Sculpture, written by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, is published in New York by Harcourt Brace; it is one of the earliest texts to focus on the aesthetic merits of African sculpture.

1927
Primitive Art, written by Franz Boas, is published by Harvard University Press.

1931
Exposition Coloniale, Paris.