



Photo: Breger

VOLTA PLACE GALLERY

1531 33RD STREET, N.W. (GEORGETOWN) WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007

202-333-9222

firms this in exact and understanding words. "In his art, Onobrakpeya has constantly moved forward, exploring frontiers with techniques that could not have been conceived of by his forefathers. And yet he has kept faith with the ancestors." A statement as beautiful as that leaves little more to say of Onobrakpeya's work than is permitted in this relatively brief booklet. But it remains an invaluable and accurate initial survey of the work of this artist which many readers will want to enjoy.

John Pooley

PRIMITIVE ART

Pre-Columbian, North American Indian, African, Oceanic

Ferdinand Anton, Frederick J. Dockstader, Margaret Trowell, Hans Nevermann

Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1979. 526 pp., 252 b/w & 302 color photos, 7 maps, 2 charts, bibliography, index. \$28.50.

This beautiful and lavishly produced book—a visual delight—deals with the arts (mainly sculptural) of three large regions of the world as reviewed by four renowned specialists. "Pre-Columbian Art of Middle and South America" is covered by Anton (pp. 6-212), and the "Later Indian Tribal Arts" by Dockstader (pp. 213-55). The arts of Africa are discussed by Trowell (pp. 256-451), and Oceania (New Guinea, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia; Australia regrettably is absent) by Nevermann (pp. 452-508). It is difficult to understand why so much more space was allowed for Pre-Columbian Middle and South America and for Africa than for Oceania and later Indian arts (which together barely cover one-fifth of the total number of pages). All chapters are integral and unmodified "reprints" of two earlier books published by Abrams (Anton and Dockstader, *Pre-Columbian and Later Indian Tribal Arts*, 1968; and Trowell and Nevermann, *African and Oceanic Art*, 1968), but strangely enough I find no mention of this. The plates and captions are also identical to the earlier works; only the bibliography has been enlarged with many recent titles. In the African section, for example, new catalogs and general introductory books have been added, but many outstanding descriptive, analytical, and comparative monographs published before and after 1968 are still lacking in the bibliography, far from being used in the text. For the Oceanic bibliographical section (where Australia, absent from the discussion, nevertheless is represented by five titles), many essential studies by Munn, Berndt, Mountford, Lewis, Valentine, Strathern, Errington, and others are missing.

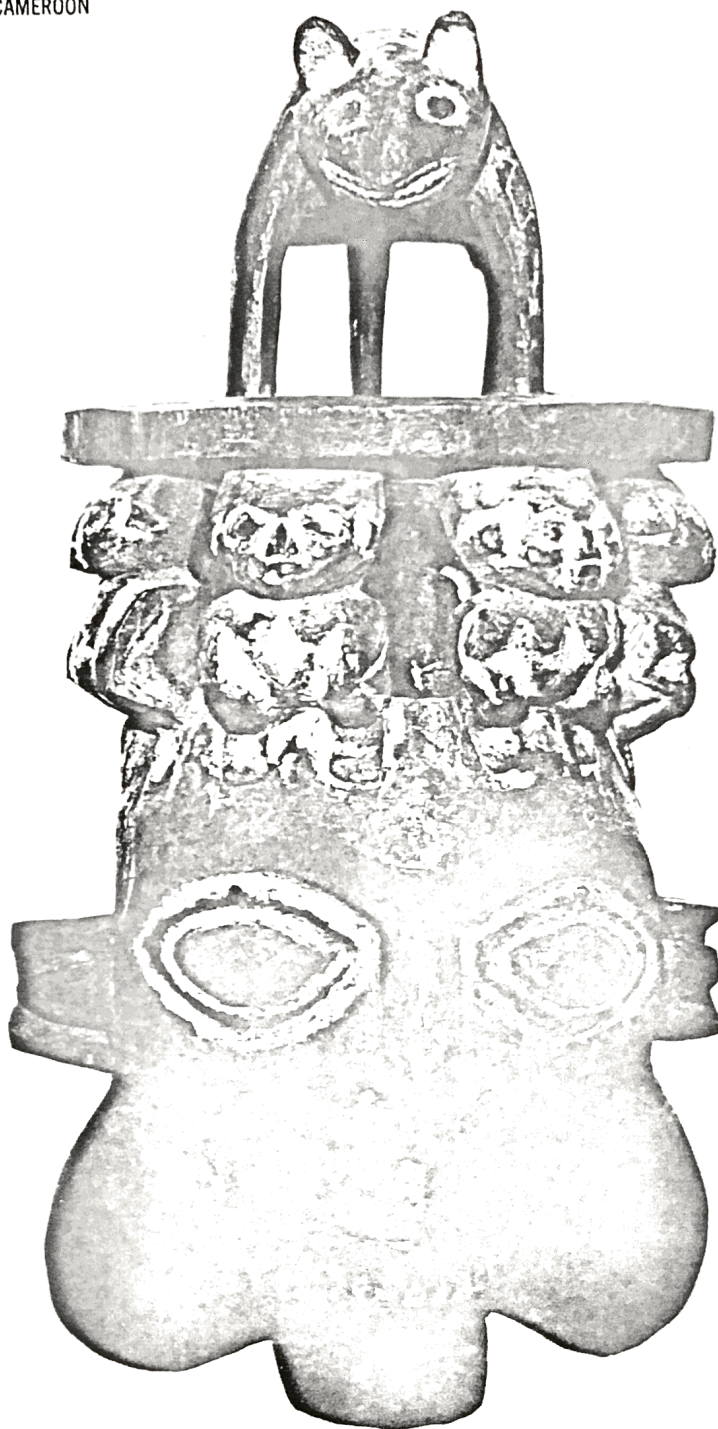
The book certainly offers an impressive but uneven pictorial overview of some art produced by the peoples included in the various regions. Because it draws together so many different styles and types of artworks, the work is a handsome testimony to the range and depth of creative genius manifest in various parts of the globe. For the layman, the short introductory texts and the brief annotations and captions contain much valuable in-

formation, but from the scholarly point of view, the book is of mixed value. No effort was made to update the facts, and the following questions arise. In a field such as primitive art that is so inadequately explored and insufficiently understood, can we afford to perpetuate the stereotypes and the guesswork? Can we ignore the still limited yet astoundingly profound and substantive information that has become available at least for some arts? Can we continue to divert the attention of the readers with randomly selected (and sometimes endlessly repeated) samples of so-called masterpieces and representative works?

The actual organization and presentation of the materials in each chapter are conceived differently. This is understandable for a survey of Pre-Columbian art, since its own requirements and possibilities are set by time depth, geographical distribution, and types of materials. The arts of the American Indians, Africa, and Oceania pose many similar problems of approach and interpretation, yet they are treated in a heterogeneous manner. Dockstader's extremely brief contribution summarily reviews stylistic areas of North America and groups together the rest of the materials respectively under the headings Mexico and Central America, and South America. Trowell's chapter on Africa considers the arts "according to subject matter" (p. 266) in terms of dubious and mixed categories such as "spirit-regarding arts" (under which are grouped masks, ancestor or cult figures, fetishes, and reliquaries), sculptures of ancient African kingdoms, and decorative or applied arts. Nevermann characterizes the arts of Oceania according to large stylistic regions (New Guinea, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia, leaving out Australia), which are further broken up into a blend of geographical areas and tribes.

Like so many other introductory books on primitive art, this work necessarily goes beyond purely artistic considerations. In various ways, the individual pieces are identified geographically, culturally, and eventually chronologically; information is supplied about usage, purpose, context, and meaning. This data cannot be surmised or inferred from the forms; it must be distilled from the best available ethnographic sources (written by professionals or others; dealing with art *per se* or with broader cultural features). If such cultural documentation is handled casually and uncritically interlaced with generalities, the captions and other explanatory details become meaningless exercises. This situation frequently occurs in this book, especially in the section on Africa. A few examples from Trowell's contribution will make the point: "the sculpture-producing tribes are both Negro and Bantu-speaking . . ." (p. 256); for craftsmen, approval necessitated "absolute conformity with past tradition" (p. 262); court art, as a "man-regarding art," can be "refined and polished but [is] often insensitive and somewhat lacking in real aesthetic value" (p. 264), whereas in the "spirit-regarding art"

BAMILEKE MASK
CAMEROON



MOURTALA DIOP

SPECIALIST IN AFRICAN ART

2020 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10023

212 • 799-2382

there is "deeper aesthetic quality" (p. 265); each tribe has "a pantheon of lesser gods and spirits" (p. 266); the head of a Bulu figurine "is Hamitic in type" (p. 378). A general introduction indicating the scope and purpose of the survey would have helped to place the work in its correct perspective.

Daniel P. Biebuyck
University of Delaware

BASKETRY

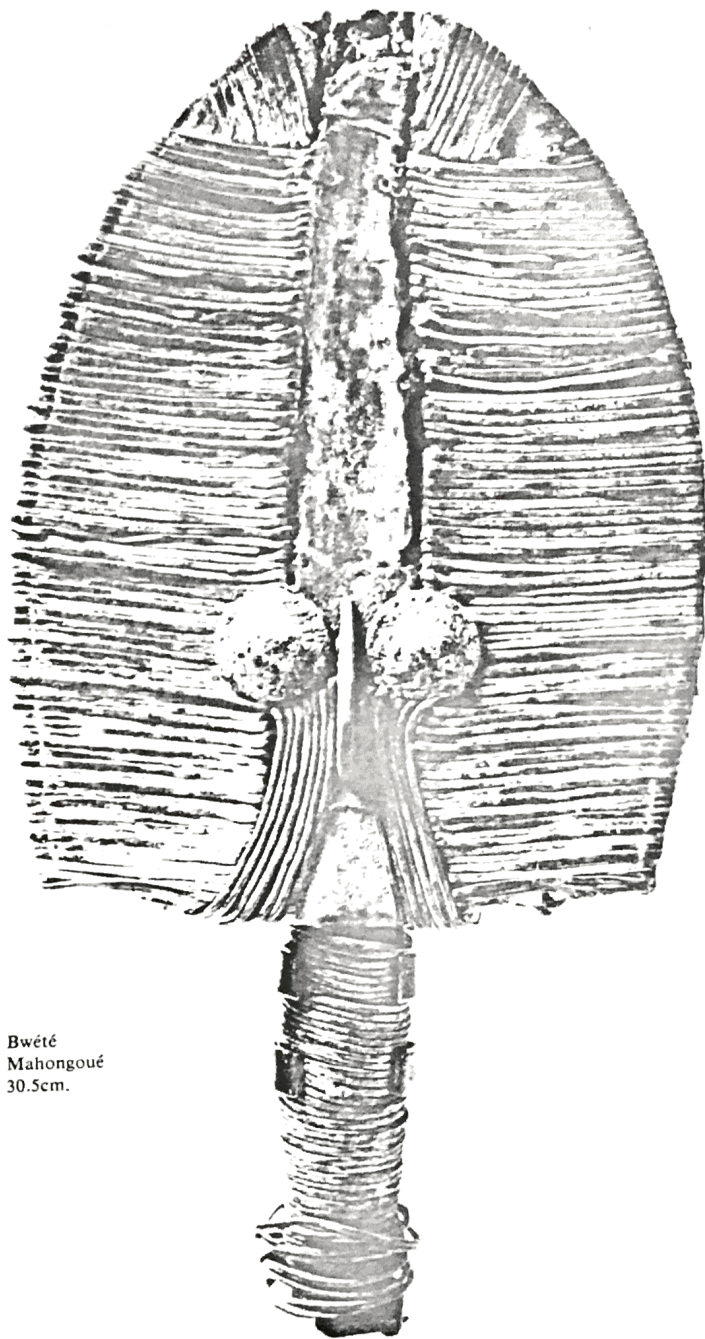
A Renaissance in Southern Africa
Rhoda Levinsohn

Protea Press, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, 1979. 94 pp., 72 b/w illustrations, 5 drawings, 5 maps, notes, bibliography. \$11.95.

It is important to stress that there is a tremendous need for scholarly and informative books and articles on African basketry. Although the publication by Rhoda Levinsohn does contain useful information, it is extremely disappointing. The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, an epilogue, an appendix, an addendum, and a "selected" bibliography. The chapters feature the basket weavers of the Bayei and Hambukushu from Botswana, the Basotho from Lesotho, and the Zulu from South Africa. In a positive vein the publication does include excellent reproductions of historically significant lithographs and engravings. In addition, there is a good combination and selection of high quality black-and-white field and museum photographs.

In a way, the text should have begun with the epilogue and the appendix. It is here that the author informs the reader that "this study . . . remains incomplete," that "this research is viewed as a preliminary study," and that "there are several issues, concerns and topical areas that remain untouched." The truth of these comments is revealed as one reads the text. The introduction contains selections from the available literature on Southern African basketry along with long quotations from Nelson Graburn's *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*. Even though Levinsohn states that her "study is congruent with the concepts set forth in Graburn's introduction," she never does anything with these concepts. Moreover, she does not indicate why Graburn's work is important. The references to Graburn appear to be grafted onto a very specific study of Southern African basketry. Finally, in the last paragraph of the introduction, the author makes many promises that will not be kept.

In the six chapters that follow, there seems to be no attempt to give equal treatment to each of the four groups that were specifically and carefully selected for this study. Chapter two is typical of the book in that it contains both gross generalizations and useful information. Levinsohn's "four basic" basketry shapes, for example, do not characterize the entire continent as she implies. Also, exactly what is a "pot-shaped" container? A good example of an absolutely unsound generalization is Ms. Levinsohn's remark that "in a society in which the family or clan predominates over the individual in importance, beer is the



Bwété
Mahongoué
30.5cm.

PAOLO MORIGI GALLERY

EXPERT

ARTE PRIMITIVA

AFRICA • AMERICA • OCEANIA

CASA CALAO • 6983 MAGLIASO • LUGANO • SWITZERLAND
TELEPHONE 091-71.19.62 • BY APPOINTMENT



Membro dell'Associazione Svizzera di Esperti in Arte Extraeuropea