
REVIEWS

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, *Leben in Linie, Muster und Farbe: Einführung in die Betrachtung aussereuropäischer Kunst* (Life in Line, Pattern, and Color: An Introduction to the Study of Non-European Art). Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1989. Pp. 176, 33 color plates, 220 b/w illustrations, 25 in situ photos, 14 line drawings, map, bibliography. SwF 58.

Reviewed by Louise Lincoln, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

A bit more than a century ago, Abelam art was undoubtedly best represented in its place of origin, the Maprik district of Papua New Guinea, between the Prince Albert range and the Sepik River. Now, of course, we are so accustomed to the role of Western museums in world culture that it does not seem strange to find the most comprehensive collection of twentieth-century Abelam art at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel Switzerland. Yet there it reposes, well displayed (a sixteen-meter men's house facade and an "initiation scene" are installed in a relatively contextualized fashion) and a tribute to the work of the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Bühler, who together with the photographer and professional traveler René Gardi assembled most of the objects.

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin has published 226 Abelam works from the Basel collection in *Leben in Linie, Muster und Farbe: Einführung in die Betrachtung aussereuropäischer Kunst*. The fundamental structure of this beautiful book is the collection itself: black-and-white photographs (some repeated in color) of a selection of objects, documented by information about materials, dimensions, and place of collection and supplemented by superb field photographs by Jörg Hauser and G. J. F. N. Gerrits. The author covers a broad range of object types, from two-dimensional painted works such as bark house-facade panels to

three-dimensional sculpture and a miscellany of art forms such as netted bags, body ornaments, and the extremely interesting and rarely published "foam carpets," evanescent images made from sudsing plants, feathers, and leaves.

A brief introductory section treats the rationale for the book, provides a brief overview of Abelam society and culture, and touches on the important issues raised by contact with the outside world. The objects are then divided into formal categories: Painting, which largely refers to bark panels; Art and Cult, which takes in miscellaneous forms such as fiber arts and material culture of initiation; and Carving, which includes everything from large wood sculpture to incised bone daggers. In each chapter the material is discussed both individually and comparatively. Herein lies one of the great strengths of the book: close readings of the formal properties of objects, enhanced by clear line drawings that schematize elements of surface pattern. Not only does this method explicate an iconographic system, but also, as like objects are compared, their similarities and differences noted, it establishes a coherent sense of Abelam visual style.

In her introductory chapter "Why This Book?" Hauser-Schäublin addresses herself to a novice audience unaccustomed to looking at non-Western art, and takes Abelam material as an example in a method that moves from the specific to the general. She makes clear that her primary focus is on art objects, not on their social context, and she proposes an analogy between visual and linguistic expression; comprehending unfamiliar art, she suggests, is like learning the vocabulary and grammatical structure of a foreign language. Unfortunately the analogy, admittedly imperfect, breaks down at the level of content. The author conveys the visual vocabulary of Abelam art extremely well but fails to elucidate the rules for assembling those elements ("grammar") and still less does she deal satisfactorily with issues of content: what meanings do these works convey? For example, she makes a careful formal distinction between figures with arms and legs folded up and those with limbs outstretched. How is this difference read in context? Is it significant in terms of iconography or function, or does it merely reflect individual style or technical skill of a particular artist?

It is instructive to compare the book with the much smaller book on the Abelam by Diane Loesch, published by the Australian Museum in Sydney. Like the Hauser-Schäublin book, Loesch's is intended for a non-specialist audience, but takes an opposite tack and begins with general observations about Abelam social and cultural context, making deft use of comparisons to Western examples. Only at the end does she deal,

rather briefly, with Abelam material culture, using examples from the Australian Museum collection; like Hauser-Schäublin, she leaves something of a gap between art objects and social structure. A general reader might find the approaches of the two books richly complementary.

This is not to say that Hauser-Schäublin is unable to go beyond the description of specific objects. She makes numerous observations of general but pertinent nature, noting, for example, that in nonliterate cultures visual representation plays a central role in the replication of society, hence its importance in the context of initiations. In her discussion of netted bags, which are made by women, she offers linguistic insight into an Abelam view of the relation between art, creativity, and gender. Production of art in traditional society is sex-specific: women make small-scale utilitarian fiber works, while men control the much larger categories of painting and sculpture. For Abelam people, the principal focus of female creativity is childbirth, with net bags being its symbolic reflection; the same term is used for net bags, initiation rooms, and mothers. Male creativity, explicitly parallel to childbirth, is concerned with art and ceremonial activities.

Hauser-Schäublin has set an ambitious goal: nothing less than a reading of Abelam culture from a close study of artifacts. Yet the focus of her work remains for the most part on the objects themselves, without moving on to their contextual use and meaning. Nonetheless the book is of enormous value, to amateurs and professionals in the study of Pacific arts alike, for its systematic review of an important museum collection, its excellent photographs, and its close visual analysis of artifacts.