
American art museums have been collecting and displaying the arts of Africa since the late nineteenth century. Kathleen Bickford Berzock (curator of African art at the Art Institute of Chicago) and Christa Clarke (curator of arts of Africa and senior curator of arts of Africa and the Americas at the Newark Museum) edited this collection of essays that document the introduction of African art and subsequent acquisition and exhibition practices of thirteen American art museums. The content of the essays is culled from institutional archives and written primarily by current and former curators of the collections. The selected institutions are wide-ranging and include the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Hampton University Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Barnes Foundation, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Museum of Primitive Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Indiana University Art Museum, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, the University of Iowa Museum of Art, the Seattle Art Museum, the Menil Collection, and the National Museum of African Art.

The essays are arranged chronologically, based on when objects from Africa were first acquired or displayed, and describe how these processes evolved over time. The essays do not interrogate how Africa was represented in American art museums nor do they compare how African objects were represented in European art museums or natural history museums. There is some repetition in this description in lieu of an interpretative approach. However, while this cyclical retelling can be tiresome on one level, it is also instructive because the histories are similar despite the differences of the museums in other matters. The essays tell variations on the same story: the circumstances surrounding the introduction of African Art into the collection, early philosophies of exhibition and display, early collection policies and interests, summaries of major African Art exhibitions, rundown of curators or educators active with the collection, placement of the collection within the institutional structure, current philosophies of acquisition and display, and occasionally, a glimpse into the future of the collection. The introduction and afterward by Bickford Berzock and Clarke do an effective job of framing the individual histories within the larger story of African Art in American and European museums and highlighting problematic decisions and future concerns.

This book is a recommended addition to museum studies, African Art, and museum history collections. Included are an index and references section for each essay.

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