

February 15, 2009

ART REVIEW

Two Shows Feature Works of Africa, and Printmaking

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

With Brandeis University announcing plans to sell artworks for financial reasons, there is much discussion these days of the university art collection as a teaching and research tool. Its value is amply demonstrated right now by the [Hofstra University](#) Museum, where a small but enlightening exhibition of 26 African artworks can be seen in the David Filderman Gallery on the ninth floor of the Donald E. Axinn Library. Everything comes from the university's permanent collection, which contains more than 250 pieces of African art.

The abundance and variety of the art makes an immediate impression as you look at a display cabinet filled with masks and headdresses from almost a dozen countries in western and central Africa. They are highly individualized in style and use of materials.

Conventional wisdom holds that most traditional African art is ceremonial or ritualistic in nature. This is certainly the case for the masks and headdresses, several of which were used for initiation ceremonies. The most spectacular is a Yaka initiation mask from the Democratic Republic of Congo consisting of a helmeted head made of painted wood and canvas. Raffia fiber encircles the face like a giant bushy beard.

Nearby is a figurative mask with a high and smooth forehead, downcast eyes, small mouth and grooved coiffure. Made of wood and metal, it embodies feminine ideals of beauty among the Vai people of northwestern Liberia and Sierra Leone. According to the wall label it was worn by high-ranking women during initiation ceremonies for adolescent girls, who were taken to forest camps to learn about marriage and child care.

But the show also makes a case for nonceremonial works of African art, with examples of secular masks, serving to enhance the status of the owner, along with utilitarian objects like weapons and tools, and a variety of figurative sculptures. The aggressive-looking war mask here from the Ivory Coast, worn before and during battles, was meant to offer the wearer magical protection while instilling fear in enemies.

Individual wall labels for artworks and a map of Africa help viewers to understand the origin and use of these objects. You will find yourself engrossed, and perhaps a bit irritated at the obvious limitations of the exhibition space, a kind of architectural cul-de-sac outside the elevator. It is time the university invested in upgrading this gallery area.

The museum's main gallery, across campus, is devoted to a lovely show of contemporary prints by five artists based in and around New York. I have seen a lot of print shows in regional museums, but this one, titled "Ancient Echoes in Contemporary Printmaking," is especially innovative and enjoyable.

It is nicely organized to show the ways in which contemporary artists are using old printmaking techniques in new and innovative ways. The artists are Jessica Baker, who doubles as the show's curator, Michael Herstand,

Brian Lynch, Tomomi Ono and Mary Pinto, all of whom are well known and respected in the New York printmaking community.

Ms. Baker has experimented with printing circular images using plexiglass and copper plates on leaves. The process is more or less the same as printing on paper except that the leaves have a limited lifespan — eventually they will turn dry and brittle and then disintegrate. Still, these brilliant, subtle and all too short-lived prints resonate in the mind long after one leaves the show. They are absolutely beautiful.

Most of the other artists experiment with lithography, one of the more recent printmaking techniques, having been invented by Alois Senefelder, a German, in 1796. It is a technique in which the artist draws directly onto a flat stone or plate with a greasy crayon. Usually the stone is then inked, with the ink clinging to the crayon marks, from where it is transferred through a printing press onto the paper.

My favorite artist here is Ms. Ono, a printmaker of exceptional sensitivity and skill. Her black and white lithographs of organic forms, subtle to the point of being washed out, remind you variously of clusters of seeds, exotic orchids or the ocean floor covered with a carpet of coral or starfish. “Seed-Kai” (2001) is a masterpiece of balanced, elegant beauty. It is also the perfect emblem for a stunning-looking show.

“Out of Africa: Works From the Hofstra University Museum Collection,” David Filderman Gallery, Ninth Floor, Donald E. Axinn Library, to March 15, and “Ancient Echoes in Contemporary Printmaking,” Emily Lowe Gallery, through March 20, Hofstra University Museum, Hempstead. Information: (516) 463-5672 or hofstra.edu/museum.