

ART REVIEW | YALE UNIVERSITY AFRICAN ART At Yale, Renovation Puts Africa in Spotlight



Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

The African art gallery at the Yale University Art Gallery, including works donated by Charles B. Benenson.

By HOLLAND COTTER Published: January 10, 2007

NEW HAVEN, Jan. 3 — Fans of air, light and it-just-feels-right in architecture will find everything to admire in the revamped and revived version of the Yale University Art Gallery's Louis Kahn building. Post-Kahnian partitions have been pulled down, picture windows uncovered. Rangy Modernist space — the space of the future when the building opened in 1953 — unfurls in all directions.

And for the first time I can remember, the famous coffered ceilings really come across as the leitmotif they were meant to be. Repeated from floor to floor, gallery to gallery, their deep tetrahedral pattern starts out feeling overbearing, then gradually becomes dynamic and a little hypnotic. It sinks into your brain. I saw it in a dream the night after my visit.

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But what about the reinstalled art, in galleries that have been closed for much of the last three years? There's fresh life of many kinds in this area, too, and at least one tremendous innovation.

The overall sense of renewal begins with a smart group sculpture show organized by Yale students in a new temporary exhibition gallery off the lobby. The work chosen, from Alexander Calder to Matthew Barney (B.A., Yale, 1989), all from the museum's holdings,

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African art like this Congo carving is featured at the Yale University Art Gallery's reopened Kahn building.

complements Kahn's candid materialism. But it also — this is the smart part — offers a picture of Modernism itself as a shaky, flaky proposition.

Upstairs, several collection favorites, like [van Gogh's](#) "Night Café" and Manet's impossibly saucy "Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume" (so fabulous), have been astutely positioned. New items have been added to various displays: a brace of Persian miniatures, a recently acquired Pontormo, a spiffed-up van Dyck that someone found buried in storage.

Elizabeth C. DeRose, a curatorial assistant, has assembled a fine small show focused on a single [Jasper Johns](#) print for the occasion. The presentation is neat and thorough, as is its small catalog. The expanded 20th-century galleries, on the other hand, are sort of a mess. But, honestly, what can you do? The 20th century was messy, and so was its art — all those voices and egos! — which is why we're nuts for it.

So you poke around and find what you like: an exquisite little Agnes Martin, an eye-snapping [Ellsworth Kelly](#), a phantasmal Arshile Gorky and on the floor a green plastic "Home Sweet Home" welcome mat by the Korean-born artist Do-Ho Suh (M.F.A., Yale, 1997), its thousands of sole-scraping bristles made from miniature human figures.

And now we come to the innovation, and the compelling reason (Kahn apart) for making a visit: a big new permanent gallery devoted to the arts of Africa, with an inaugural display of a size and quality to put Yale at the head of the class, among university art museums, in this field.

Most of the art arrived only recently. It's from a collection of nearly 600 African objects given to the museum by Charles B. Benenson (1913-2004), a New York real estate developer and Yale alumnus. And in addition to leaving Yale one of the largest gifts of art in its history, Mr. Benenson endowed a curatorial position in African art at the museum. Frederick John Lamp, formerly of the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#), has the job, and he designed the inaugural installation.

Africa is immense and immensely, complexly diverse. Try to define its art strictly by region or culture and you're in trouble. Existing national boundaries are largely colonial inventions. As he produced a terrific multidisciplinary book, "See the Music, Hear the Dance" (Prestel), in Baltimore. Rather than narrow categories, he expands them.

As if in direct contrast to the compartmentalized European installation, he has left the African space undivided and open. Although some objects have been bunched into thematic units, most fall under two loose conceptual categories, based on the idea of art as psychologically and spiritually "cool" or "hot," a distinction explored by many art historians, among them Robert Farris Thompson, with whom Mr. Lamp studied at Yale.

Coolness, connoting serenity and benevolence, streams from the powdery-white female figure in a Yoruba shrine sculpture at the gallery entrance. And it is the essence of a grand Baga dance mask representing an ideal of maternal probity. Exceptional in size and beauty, it is one of the noblest images at Yale, and anywhere else, for that matter.

Arrayed on a diamond-shaped platform across from it is a kind of flying wedge of smaller "hot" figures, several from Cameroon and Nigeria. Grimacing, twisting, generally making a spectacle of themselves, they project volatile, forceful, even violent dispositions. In the right hands, their energy can be channeled in a positive, coactive direction, and Mr. Benenson seems to have been particularly partial to them, judging by the number here.

He was also that rare thing, a connoisseur of the uncanonical hybrid in art, as demonstrated by the presence of a headdress mask of a water spirit from Sierra Leone. With its brashly painted face and serpentine body made of imported leopard-skin-pattern fabric, the piece is a hot-cool medley, sweetly fanciful but also fierce in the

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Pieces like this stand well outside “classical” African art as defined by Western taste, and I’m told there is more, and even wilder, stuff in the Benenson gift. If so, I can’t wait to see it. (Maybe some of it will show up in a show of new acquisitions scheduled for September.) In fact, my single reservation about the new gallery is that it is a mite tame, adhering too closely to well-mapped ground.

Over the last few decades, scholars, and specifically scholars of African art, have been redrawing that map. They’ve scrambled, revamped and revived all sorts of old-time either/ors: art vs. artifact, Western vs. non-Western, functional vs. spiritual. They’ve shown that sound, movement and touch, the very elements we police our museums against, are essential to African art’s meaning. They *are* the art, because they complete it.

Much of the redrawing has been through experimental exhibitions, notably those at the Museum for African Art in New York, of which Mr. Benenson was a founding trustee. (The same institution’s founding director, Susan M. Vogel, was director of the Yale University Art Gallery in the 1990s.)

Of course, the present Yale installation is just a start. Mr. Lamp already has interesting plans in the works. They will lead him, no doubt, to tell the African art story differently in years to come. And his successors, perhaps one of his own students among them, may tell that history yet another way.

I love art for its pleasures, but I believe it is ultimately about teaching and self-education. University art museums are where self-education for many teachers-to-be begins. This is what makes them such important institutions. They are safe houses for success and failure alike. (I hope the new African gallery risks both in a big way.) And they are workshops where intellectual space and ethical light should be abundant, which is why the reopened Kahn building feels so right.

The Yale University Art Gallery is at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven; (203) 432-0600.

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