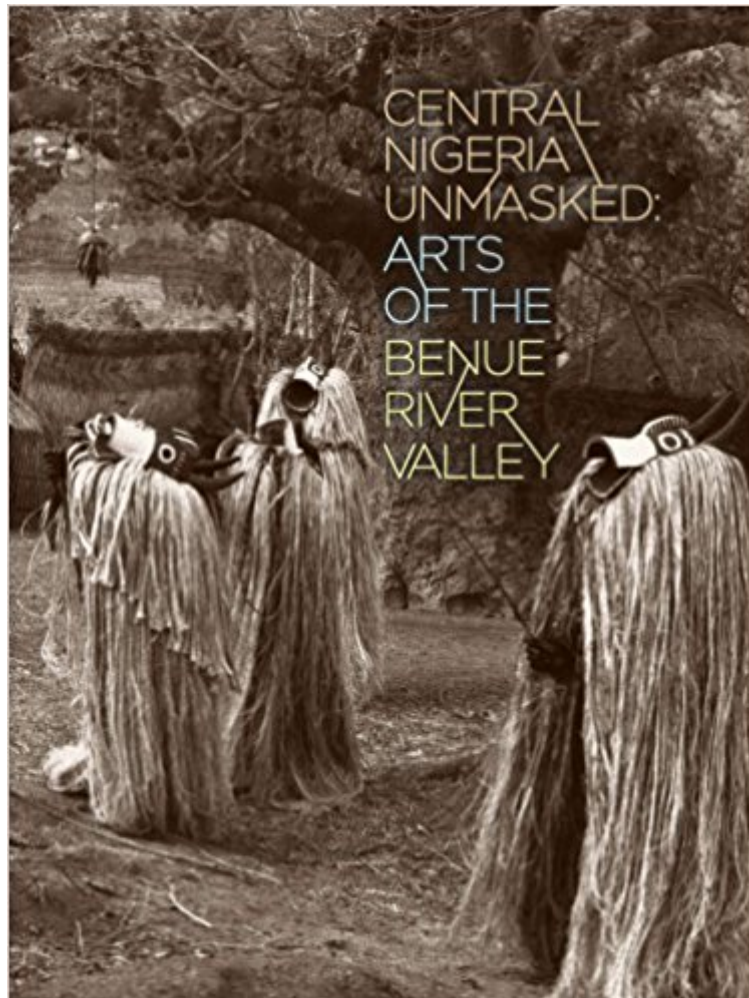




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Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts Of The Benue River Valley



Synopsis

Winner of the Arnold Rubin Outstanding Publication Award from the Arts Council of the African Studies Association
The Benue River Valley is the source of some of the most abstract, dramatic, and inventive sculpture in sub-Saharan Africa. A vast region, the Valley extends from the heart of present-day Nigeria eastward to its border with Cameroon, and is home to a large number of ethnic and linguistic groups, all of whom have produced sculptures that are remarkable for their variety. This book brings together figurative wood sculptures and ceramic vessels, masks, and elaborate bronze and iron regalia drawn from public and private collections in Europe and the United States, selected to exemplify important typologies within the region, along with many historical photographs. The 18 contributors demonstrate that the stylistic tendencies were constantly evolving due to cultural exchanges, mutual influences, and other points of contact in an area that like the Benue River itself was historically in a state of flux. These objects speak to us not only through their superb formal qualities but also through the circumstances of their being rooted in a turbulent past, situated between war and colonization.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"... to be enjoyed when you are awake and concentrating and hungry for information about some of the strangest and most beautiful images you'll ever see." •Holland Cotter, The New York Times, November 2011

Marla C. Berns is director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA. Richard Fardon is professor of West

African anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir is professor of African art history at Emory University. Other contributors include Joerg Adelberger, Gassia Armenian, Jean Borgatti, John Boston, Mette Bovin, Barbara Frank, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, Helene Joubert, Nancy Neaher Maas, John Picton, Susan Picton, Arnold Rubin, Constanze Weise, and John C. Willis.

The Good: The book, at 600 pages, is a great reference and informative source for tribal art from the Benue River. It contains good descriptions of material. This was also the book traveling with the exhibit (I saw it at the Smithsonian African Museum). I recommend you buy whichever copy you can afford. **The Bad:** I bought the hardcover edition, and per description, the spine had separated from the binding. Difficult to believe a \$100 book would have such a poor manufacturing job. If you buy the book new, check the binding ! The book is not a 'picture book'. While it does contain a large number of photos, they are not full page and are relative to the written material. Some photos are of 'masterpieces' of tribal art; I would have enjoyed some full page photos.

Softcover with flaps, 12" x 9", 607 pages, Hundreds of color & b/w field and object photos throughout, 4 maps, References and Index. Quality paper and binding, but with a book of this weight and size, handle with care. Published by Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2011. The book commemorates 4 exhibitions : Fowler Museum, UCLA, 2011; National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian, 2011- 2012; Cantor Arts Center at Stamford University, 2012; Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, 2012 -2013. This book offers a comprehensive review of the art produced by the tribes along the Benue River in Nigeria.....However.....I've only given this book 3 stars because....although this is an important and thoroughly researched study, the beautiful works of art themselves are completely overwhelmed by an ocean of text. Photographs of simply wonderful tribal items are often consigned to a quarter page or sixth page or even eighth page size. This patronizing minimization of the art itself is a great pity, because this striking and often visceral art speaks for itself. With a hugely ambitious book like this, it seems like a lost opportunity not to feature the stunning art over the learned opinion. This book required a little self-editing, or maybe even a second volume. As an example of my point, when I pick up one of my "Western Art" books, the actual art of Pollock or Hockney or Bacon or Chagall is not consigned to an insignificant corner of the page, hemmed in on all sides by the art critic's words...the art is exactly where it is supposed to be : front and center. The art is not there to support what the writer is saying about it....the words, if any, should be there to enhance our appreciation of the art, not to supplant it. If you want to read about African art, consider

this a 5 star publication, but if you want to see African art for yourself, 3 stars is about the max. Try out this far less "worthy" book to see how art can be complimented by words, not suffocated by them :Â From Yelwa to Yola: Sculpture of Northern NigeriaIn fairness, I should add one point : As of the end of 2012, this massive volume was still available (in paperback) at about fifty bucks....Not a bad deal despite my reservations.

I am enamored with this book and have not discovered another publication on this subject near as comprehensive or wonderful. The collaboration with Black African indigenous experts and a list of 'contributors' with extensive field work in Nigeria has brought together one of the greatest publications of our time. Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts Of The Benue River Valley teems with a spectrum of insight into the history and constant state of evolution with Nigeria's diverse peoples and their cultures along the Benue River.I am reminiscent of the bookÂ Art of CameroonÂ with the irrevocable concept of primarily thinking and viewing African masquerades and objects through their inventive perspectives. In turn, this means one needs to obtain an understanding of a specific tribe's basic beliefs, ideas, symbols, but most importantly, their (current) societal events and challenges apart from Western ideologies (as these notions are not compatible).Previously, I purchased a mask which certainly DID NOT present itself as a credulous example from the common groups of Nigeria. It was sold as an Ibibio zoomorphic relic. Attempting to confirm the origin proved to be an extremely difficult task. I researched for years with a tenacity and finally discovered a strikingly similar Igala specimen from the Ibaji area of the Benue river in this book! Prior to this, the absolute best I could find was an old photo dated before 1931 represented as Igbo (Mmanwu) from the Cross River region.Anyone desiring to obtain a clearer understanding of Nigeria's myriad of art, cultures, and evolution should include this publication with their reference books. It is deeply under-priced.Unfortunately there are a few challenging aspects, but the benefits out-way the following issues; 1.. The book is very heavy, over 600 pages. 2.. The binding is merely "okay", but not superior quality (as with Prestel or high quality publications). 3.. The hard cover tears easily - causing separation from the book. I reinforced the inside of my book to maintain structural integrity. Despite the problem with the cover, the paper quality, photos and supporting text are excellent / exceptional.

Heavy on text and images are not sumptuously photographed. But interesting exemplars and worth having for the collector of African Art. Based on an exhibition at Stanford University..

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