

BOOK REVIEW

Gaëlle Beaujean. *L'art de la cour d'Abomey: Le sens des objets*. Paris: Presses du réel, 2019. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. € 18.00. Paper. ISBN: 9782840663782.

Published in French, *L'art de la cour d'Abomey* is the first monograph by Gaëlle Beaujean, curator of African collections at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, France. Based on her doctoral dissertation in social anthropology and ethnology at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, the book examines the art of the royal court of Abomey, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. Beaujean approaches these artworks and artifacts by exploring their histories and changing meanings.

Richly illustrated with maps, engravings, and photographs, *L'art de la cour d'Abomey* is divided into three parts. The first part of the book, “The Royal Art of Abomey Between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” is comprised of three chapters, which provide an overview of the history of Abomey royal arts through the lens of the formation of the kingdom of Dahomey. Beaujean relies on the existing Africanist historiography as well as on primary sources, especially travel accounts. The author also incorporates oral accounts by Abomey local historians such as Gabin Djimassé and Bah Nondichao, the official historian of the royal families of Abomey, and examines several examples of existing objects. These chapters also explore the mythology associated with the creation of Dahomey as well as its urban development. Beaujean traces the development of the art of the royal court as it relates to the kingdom’s expansion, especially after the conquest of the kingdoms of Allada and Hueda, which allowed Dahomey to control the port of Ouidah. As the Atlantic slave trade became a central economic activity in the kingdom, Beaujean explains how Dahomey incorporated foreign religious practices and objects collected during the wars against the neighboring states.

The second part of the book, titled “Contact,” examines in more detail the exchanges between the kingdom of Dahomey and various European states, which emerged from economic and cultural interactions with Europe and the Americas. These three chapters discuss the European views of Dahomey, how the art of the royal court appears in existing travelogues, and how artworks produced in the kingdom traveled to other regions such as present-day Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil. These chapters provide an ethnography of the royal court with its ceremonies and burial practices, exploring

the use of locally-made artifacts in copper, silver, gold, and iron, including objects such as scepters, thrones, pipes, caps, umbrellas, and sandals. This second part surveys the colonial war that led to the French conquest of Dahomey. Beaujean examines how the military led by General Dodds randomly, but effectively, seized the collections that were housed in the royal palaces. The author also discusses how other European powers such as Germany and Britain incorporated part of the spoils of war into their museum collections.

In the third section of the book, Beaujean provides an overall inventory of the various objects seized. In addition, the two chapters of this third segment examine the trajectory of a variety of artifacts and artworks from Abomey to museums in France and other parts of the world, with a particular attention to their inclusion in the collections of The Trocadero Ethnography Museum, then the Musée de l'Homme, and eventually the Quai Branly Museum.

In this impressive book, Beaujean exhaustively describes the wealth of Abomey royal art, while also offering a rich, sensitive, and innovative analysis of the significance of the various objects in the context of the history of the kingdom of Dahomey and of West African art. This monograph is also the first to provide a detailed account of the processes through which these objects were looted from Dahomey, transported to Europe, and introduced into private western collections and museums. In times when the debates about restitution of African heritage dominate the public sphere, especially in the French context, Beaujean's book becomes an essential reading for all academics studying West African art as well as scholars seeking to understand the complex and tortuous paths that brought Dahomean artifacts and artworks to European and North American institutions. Ultimately, *L'art de la cour d'Abomey* is a crucial contribution to the field of African studies and African art history.

Ana Lucia Araujo

Howard University

Washington, DC

aaaraujo@howard.edu

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Bay, Edna G. 1979. "On the Trail of the Bush King: A Dahomean Lesson in the Use of Evidence." *History in Africa* 6: 1–15. doi:10.2307/3171738.

Blier, Suzanne Preston. 1989. "Field Days: Melville J. Herskovits in Dahomey." *History in Africa* 16: 1–22. doi:10.2307/3171776.

Law, Robin, and King Agaja of Dahomey. 2002 "An Alternative Text of King Agaja of Dahomey's Letter to King George I of England, 1726." *History in Africa* 29: 257–71. doi:10.2307/3172163.