

Culture



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Volume 3, numéro 1, 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084165ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084165ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Inglis, S. (1983). André NITECKI, *Equal Measure for Kings and Commoners: Goldweights of the Akan*, Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, 1982. 69 pages, maps, photographs. *Culture*, 3(1), 125–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084165ar>

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Exhibition / Exposition

André NITECKI, *Equal Measure for Kings and Commoners : Goldweights of the Akan*, Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, 1982. 69 pages, maps, photographs.

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For many museum visitors, a good catalogue complements and enhances an exhibit in a special way. Beyond the catalogue's reference and souvenir value, however important, there is a feeling that it represents a part of an experience which can be taken away and perhaps relived. If, in this way, printed words and images have become our amulets as well as sources of knowledge and nostalgia, then they must be assembled and packaged with particular care.

What seems to work well is a catalogue which falls between a volume which requires serious attention and a pamphlet which gets thrown away. The photographs should provide access to the objects without forcing the reader to run a gauntlet of text and busy backdrops. A clean layout should enable the reader to open the book at random, without feeling guilt or confusion. A catalogue, of course, must also provide information and insight which can enhance the understanding of the objects and their meanings. In his catalogue for the recent Glenbow Museum exhibit, "Equal Measure for Kings and Commoners : Goldweights of the Akan", André Nitecki has achieved a worthwhile balance.

A short introduction and history of the region of Africa in which the weights are used is well illustrated with maps. This is followed by sections which introduce types of weights, chronology of use, and the system of weighing. The complexities of the system are introduced and discussed. The method of casting is described and clearly illustrated with diagrams. Throughout this survey of goldweights, one literally never loses sight of the objects under discussion. Excellent photographs by John Dean are expertly reproduced on nearly every page, in fact more than half of the pages of this catalogue are devoted to photographs of the objects.

While the catalogue is undoubtedly a success in presenting Akan goldweights as art objects, I think it is less successful in its discussion of their cultural meaning in Akan society. The final sections are least satisfying in this regard. Listing "contentment" and "intellect" as characteristics of design (p. 31) is confusing and references to single weights which presumably illustrate each characteristic are even more so. While I am quite willing and accustomed to have my attention directed to an object that is "a sheer pleasure to the eye", I cannot accept the assertion, in the absence of supporting evidence, that it is possible to "see" Akan society by "reading" the goldweights. It has been well established, thanks in part to the work of museum ethnologists, that the relationship between an art form and the society in which it is created is far more complex than the "mirror" metaphor used by Nitecki would imply. The section titled "Characteristics of Design" concludes with the statement: "By 'reading' the goldweights we can 'see' the Akan peoples as calm, elegant, philosophically secure, self-sufficient, and above all unified by a continuing belief in their moral and social values undisturbed by outside occurrences." Aside from the fact that the very existence of a society of this description seems implausible, there is little evidence in the images or the text from which one could draw such a conclusion about the Akan.

The link between object and meaning is further explored in the section titled "Weights and Proverbs", and with much the same result. Caution with regard to drawing direct correspondences between weights and proverbs is introduced and then overlooked. It is not clear if the association made here between particular weights and proverbs implies a conception of the Akan, writers quoted by the author, or the author himself. If this is more than a random matching of one kind of creative expression with another, then where does the significance lie? The interested reader longs to know how the designs of the weights derive their cultural meaning. What, for example, is the relevance of the weight designs for their use in trade?

These are questions that could perhaps best be dealt with in a more extensive publication. It is

evident that there is enough conventional museum knowledge about goldweights and sufficient cross-cultural interest in the design of these objects to support an exhibit successfully complemented by a catalogue. I'm sure that many readers will share with Professor Posansky, who wrote the foreword to this catalogue, an appreciation of the Glenbow Museum's contribution toward supporting exhibi-

tions of the art of cultures from throughout the world. Yet one question lingers. Are museum exhibits of objects from other cultures to be experiences directed toward an understanding of the original context and meaning of those objects or simply toward our own re-contextualization of them, and more importantly, are we yet able or willing to distinguish between the two?