

Book & Video Reviews

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Africa: Women's Art, Women's Lives*

Author: Betty La Duke

Publisher: Africa World Press, Inc.,
Trenton, NJ 08607

Date: 1997

ISBN: 0-86543-4344, Cloth \$24.95, 208pp.

"Art and life are inseparable in Africa," states author Betty La Duke after almost a decade of annual journeys to the African continent. And then she proves that to be true in this sequel to her first book, *Africa Through the Eyes of Women Artists* (1990). The book evolved from Mrs. La Duke's travels and research in various African nations where she immersed herself in the cultural and historical perspectives of local artists.

Each chapter of *Africa: Women's Art, Women's Lives* focuses on a geographical area and the women who produce the art particular to that region. An overview of the chapters includes:

Chapter 1: "Burkina Faso: The Painted Walls of Tiebele, Tiakone, and Po"

Women annually paint the mud walls of their houses and grain storage huts, making these structures into colorful patterned sculptures that bear "witness to rites of passage, birth, marriage and death" (p.4).

Chapter 2: "Timbuktu, Mali: Desert Visions in Fabric, Straw, and Leather"

Women at the World Vision Christian Center use sewing machines and hand stitching to produce intricate embroidery and appliqué-embellished garments. At a nearby collective, members "cut and shape leather bags, wallets, and smaller items and embellish them with distinctively detailed designs" (p.33). Al Madane Handedeou, a woman famous for her straw baskets and jewelry, shows her "Timbuktu Gold."

Chapter 3: "The pottery of Mali, Cameroon, and Togo"

In rural West Africa, pottery is both utilitarian and ceremonial; it is made by women in collective associations who establish prices and coordinate marketing. Painted motifs on the pots are made by a brush of chicken feathers and pigments of ground bones, irons, and stones.

Chapter 4: "Cameroon: Beads, Anlu, and Social Change"

Village women create wood sculpture completely covered with cloth stitched beads. (Beads are linked to royal power and status, even today.) Ten beads are threaded together with a fine needle and sewn onto the fabric in intricate designs. Anlu is an organization with a long history of enforcing social justice for women.

Chapter 5: "Zimbabwe: Shona Women Sculptors"

Four women sculptors represent the female form in their carved stone figures. They "offer a refreshingly vivid, feminist, and life-affirming perspective" (p. 112) as they "find their own lives and relationships as worthy themes for expression" (p. 115).

Chapter 6: "Zimbabwe: Rainbird Women and Weya Women's Art"

In the mid 1980s, German artist Ilse Noy initiated a weaving collective and appliqué workshop for rural women which eventually benefited the lives of over 500 women. Their aesthetic expression unfolds in bright colors and reveals many aspects of their everyday reality.

Chapter 7: "Eritrea: Artists/Fighters with New Visions"

After years of European Colonialism and war with Ethiopia, Eritrean women artists document their experiences in realistic paintings of woman heroes that promote national unity.

Each chapter is filled with Ms. La Duke's wonderful stylized pen and ink illustrations as well as her black and white photographs of the artists and their art works. The profuse images bring the very readable text to life and project an immediacy about the encounter. One only wishes some of the photos could be in color to better convey the vivid vitality that is described in the written passages.

Africa: Women's Art, Women's Lives is something of a special travel guide. We feel we are on an exciting journey to an exotic land with author La Duke leading us to the most fascinating sights. She also educates us along the way; conventional stereotypes are displaced by the up-to-date realities of the artists we meet. Her exuberant, straightforward writing style engenders our enthusiasm and respect for the subject. In her Introduction, the author states, "For African women, their passion to create images that reveal their personal thoughts about social and political issues is manifested in unique art forms little known in the West." Ms. La Duke's passion to communicate what she has witnessed means that African art forms will be better known and better understood in the West. She has shed light on a "small part of this complex and culturally rich continent" (p. 187). We hope this book becomes only one of many volumes that illuminate the creative visions and aesthetic contributions of African women artists.

Reviewed by

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VIDEO REVIEW

Title: *Persistent Women Artists: Pablita Velarde, Mine Okubo, Lois Mailou Jones*
ISBN 0-924041-03-X

Presented by: Betty La Duke
(copyright 1996, 28 minutes)
Southern Oregon State College Productions

Distributed by: Reading & O'Reilly, Inc.
P.O. Box 302
Wilton, CT 06897

In this video, three vibrant and spirited women artists, who happen to be in there 7th, 8th, or 9th decade, talk with Betty La Duke about their art and their lives. We the viewers are brought along as guests in their homes/studios for these casual and candid conversations. We leave each encounter with new affection or with renewed admiration for what these women have achieved over the years against some profoundly difficult odds.

Pablita Velarde, An American Indian, recounts her life on the reservation and her decision to create paintings rather than to make or decorate traditional pottery. (There is also a brief mention of Velarde's famous daughter, Helen Hardin, who died of cancer in 1984 just as her reputation was becoming widespread.)

Mine Okubo converses in her Greenwich Village apartment about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and her pictorial documentation of life in the camps. She discusses the change in her imagery and colors and styles over the years and the influences she seeks to represent.

Lois Mailou Jones is sharp and articulate at 90 years of age; she offers a capsule summary of her life and times. There are Post-Impressionistic paintings of her days in France in the 1930s, the flat-patterning inspired by her visits to Haiti, the Cubistic tendencies derived from the African art she has collected. While she speaks fondly of the diaspora and its positive effect on black artists in this hemisphere, Ms. Jones reiterates her desire to go down in history as an *American* artist.

All three women are shining role models for all women artists. And it is a joy to be able to tag along with Betty La Duke on her visits and to eavesdrop on these delightful and informal conversations. Ms. La Duke does not interview the artists, but rather, allows them to talk about themselves and their art. We get the feeling that we are hearing about what they wish to emphasize. And these first hand accounts of the artists behind the names and reputations are fascinating if too

brief (at 8-10 minutes each). However, Ms. La Duke focuses on the significant aspects of these artists, with a good mix of photographs, art works, and shots of women speaking on camera.

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Maryl Fletcher DeJong writes:

A short Women's Caucus history is printed in *The National Art Education Association, Our History—Celebrating 50 Years 1947-1997*, edited by John Michael, 1997, pages 120-132. Copies for NAEA members are \$20, plus shipping and handling and can be purchased from NAEA, 1916 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1590, or 1-800-299-8321.

EXHIBITIONS/PRESENTATIONS BY WC MEMBERS

Billi R. S. Rothove presented two seminars, "The Visual Artist and Self-Promotion," and "Planning and Organizing Temporary Exhibitions" at "Rhythms and Hues Convergence 98," the international conference of the Handweavers Guild of America held in Atlanta, July 23-26, 1998. She was one of only 75 invited fiber artists to present at this premiere meeting of the textile community. Over 2000 fiberarts and craftspeople from more than 20 countries participated in the event which featured textile exhibits, speakers, and special events.

Rothove is the gallery coordinator for the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. She also exhibits her batiked, stitched and beaded artworks nationally in galleries and museums. She holds a BFA in Fibers from the Kansas City Art Institute and a Master of Art and Education Specialist degrees from Central Missouri State University, Warrensburg.

Rikki Asher exhibited a series of New York cityscape silk paintings and prints at the Nora Gallery in Jerusalem, July 20-July 11, 1998. Asher is a faculty member and Director of Art Education in Secondary Education and Youth Services, Queens College, CUNY. Asher offers a visual interpretation of a city she grew up in. "In my work, I attempt to reflect the city through the way I use color and silk. It is the silk that allows me to capture the city through the hard and soft images, the changing moods of the urban setting with its planned and unplanned visual effects."

Asher writes, "My husband was going to a wedding in Jerusalem. I was teaching and unable to join him. I decided to search the Internet to find galleries interested in my work. A few were interested. One owner suggested I send slides via my husband. I did. In the fall, another wedding brought us to Israel. This time I accompanied him, and had a gallery appointment. The owner liked the work and we made arrangements for a show."

Asher holds her doctorate in Art Education from Columbia University Teachers College, and her M.F.A. in painting from CUNY at Lehman College. A graduate of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, she has been a teaching artist at the Lincoln Center Institute for The Arts in Education and the Museum of Modern Art since September, 1995. Her work is featured in the books, *The Best Silk Painting* by Diane Tuckman and Jan Janus, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua* by David Kunzle and *Art in the Public Interest* by Arlene Raven.

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the women's caucus report

National Art Education Association Affiliate

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