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Review
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Z. S. STROTHER
Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 364 pp.; 118 color ills. $50.00

From human trafficking to slavery, from kidnapping to sexual assault, from forced labor to flogging, tens of millions of Central Africans suffered physical and psychological abuse at the hands of Europeans and their agents between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of colonization in 1960. In addition to the agony and the massive demographic shifts such events initiated, the violence produced a patina of mistrust and fear that colored victim and perpetrator alike. Such difficult terrain, the art it engendered, and our discomfort in even broaching such material form the foundation of Z. S. Strother's extraordinary study *Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art.* The book's seven chapters analyze art, artists, representation, reception, and patronage within, in her words, "regimes of violence" (p. 2). Within this setting, the author's consideration of the myriad workings of humor is of paramount importance.

While there has been increased interest in the connections between Africa and the world beyond the continent in recent years, the literature on the representation of non-Africans in African art remains small. Suzanne Preston Blier's pioneering 1993 *Art Bulletin* essay, "Imagining Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese ca. 1492," and Nii Quarcoopome's provocative 2010 exhibition, *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present,* at the Detroit Institute of Arts are important precedents and provocations for the present study. However, *Humor and Violence* ranks as the most thorough and nuanced study of the topic to date.[1]

In her preface and first chapter, Strother provides an overview of the book's primary agenda: to unpack representations of Europeans that speak to violence and its effects on the cultural milieus in which the art objects were created. She is also invested in the dialectic between violence and humor, for the latter's ability "to weaken, to dominate, or to change the balance of power raises intriguing questions about the representation of Europeans in Central African art" (p. xv). Humor, Strother reminds us, can cut through seemingly impenetrable walls between different groups of people. If only for a moment, it can intervene in the power dynamics between Europeans and their African hosts. In looking at both, Strother deftly explores what art, patronage, and reception tell us not only about Congolese experiences of violence but also formal and thematic innovation in the arts.

Understanding that sight is not objective but instead constructed through one's subject position, chapter 2 provides a lesson in seeing. Incorporating Huey Copeland's conception of "raced vision" (p. 23)[2] and that its projection onto African art produces misunderstanding, Strother shows, through the example of a Giwoyo mask and her experiences as a researcher among the Pende, how the group's notions of physiognomy direct the way they see and interpret. She gives the example of the Belgian anthropologist Léon de Sousberghe, who, working with his own cultural baggage, misread the Pende objects he saw. The comparison between the Pende and the anthropologist allows the author to make the point that in Pende contexts one cannot always accurately comprehend artworks by sight alone. The identity of Pende masks are not always ascertained solely by physical attributes; they can also be discerned through performance. Furthermore, Strother also addresses the means by which raced vision inflected how Africans understood Europeans. Focusing on a Chokwe comb, a Yombe figure, a British Tory jug in Angola, and a Banana engraved gourd, she explores the ways Central Africans saw, judged, and made sense of these strangers. These objects exemplify that Central African ways of seeing and understandings of the world produced complex images of Europeans.

Chapters 3 through 7 are compelling case studies that enumerate how relationships between Africans and Europeans fostered artistic innovation. In chapter 3, we learn that, between the 1840s and 1910s, trade, economic instability, human trafficking, and, finally, full-scale colonial occupation and scientific research were connected to the interest in art objects on the Loango Coast. Strother cautions, "No matter how beguiling the imagery on the works on the coast, viewers must remember that violence served as the necessary backdrop for all representations of Europeans or Americans, even those touched by flashes of humor" (p. 42). Closely examining a group of carved ivory tusks and a wooden ceremonial staff, Strother explains not only that African artists viewed Europeans as Other but also the different perceptions of imagery by various social groups. For example, a European with his hand in his jacket pocket might be viewed in a Western context as nonchalant; however, an African onlooker may think that he has something to hide. In addition, she considers sources documenting the isolation, anxiety, and depression European visitors experienced to suggest why they would have embraced the carnivalesque work of African carvers. Such objects offered them the cathartic release of laughter "without perceiving a meaningful threat to [their] own privileged position in the social hierarchy" (p. 73).

Chapter 4 centers on ivories that exist as allegories of human trafficking and violence. Considering that these objects were created after the end of the transatlantic slave trade, Strother asks how one can understand this genre. She interprets the ivories as the psychological framing of captivity, which for many did not end with the cessation of the export of human cargo; she connects the ivories with the rise of colonization as well. Images of Europeans relaxing amid mayhem intimate their collusion with and passive instigation of violence. Strother concludes that the depiction of self-absorbed Europeans surrounded by violence delivered a "caustic social commentary on European character" (p. 125). Conversely, the author notes that for the Europeans who commissioned these objects, they stood as allegories of African pathology and brutality, deeds of which they claimed to have had no part.

In a striking move, Strother not only explores the juxtaposition of brutality and humor in these ivories but also provides another lesson in seeing. It would seem that the eye should follow an ivory's spiral from bottom to top. However, Strother teaches us that people processed the images on a tusk from a single side (p. 101). She thus shows that the ivories do not offer linear narratives but rather convey meanings through the combination of images. This new way of reading these objects produces a better understanding of them.

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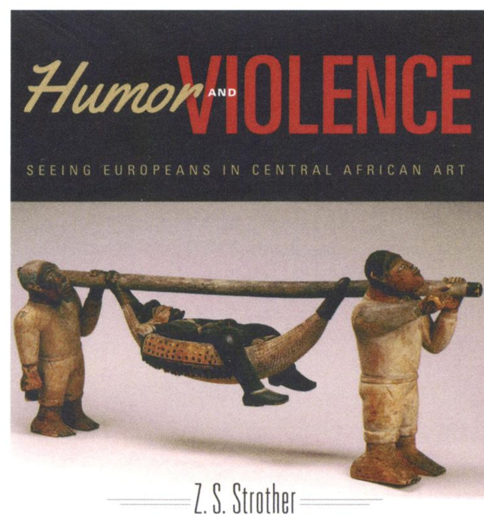
The representation of European men could also be metaphoric. At times monkeys stand in for Europeans. In one stunning example, an ape eating a banana while scratching its buttocks stands as an allegory for European greed and malfeasance. Europeans did not realize that they were the butt of the joke.

In chapter 5, Strother delves into the expansion of European domination and, along with it, the dissemination of representations of Europeans. Among new forms, the most popular was the depiction of a European in a *tipoy* (hammock or sedan chair): "it was the African equivalent to having oneself photographed in front of the Eiffel Tower" (p. 155). While Europeans saw such humorous objects as flattering and harmless, Strother views the work against the backdrop of the terror used by Europeans to control Africans gathering rubber and ivory, some of which was documented in photographs that spread throughout the West by 1900. The *tipoy* sculpture of a natty European trader echoed countless nineteenth-century engravings of colonial leisure and authority that circulated throughout the West. However, for African audiences, this overdressed man carried by porters who seem lost would have been ridiculous. In using humor to critique and give form to the terror that structured the lives of so many Central Africans, sculptors made Europeans into objects of mockery.

Yet, as we learn, the Zande artist Songo managed to break through violence with his humorous scenes on a commissioned cup, creating a momentary bond between mistrustful and fearful parties. Over a twenty-year period, Zande artists demonstrated deft skill negotiating with Europeans. The anthropomorphism and new objects that made Zande art desirable were products of European and American patronage.

Chapter 6 examines works made by Congolese artists for Congolese audiences. These objects speak to experiences of resistance, collusion, and outright rebellion. They express deeply felt emotions and trade in ethnic humor. A set of Nkanu panels, for example, teach young boys how to behave in an initiation. At the same time, they satirize European sexual promiscuity and violence. While Europeans may have been the butt of Nkanu jokes, as Strother points out, representations of strangers are not always that clear-cut. The panels stand as caustic, bawdy portrayals of colonial officials who were in Pendeland. However, Strother asks if the frequent depiction of European promiscuity reflects an identification with the aggressor, even if expressed through envy.

One of *Humor and Violence*'s most compelling discussions concerns a power figure created on the heels of the Pende rebellion of 1931. Portraying the Belgian colonial Maximilien Balot, murdered by the Pende, the figure sought to capture the spirit of the brutal officer and redirect it to protect the object's users. Strother details the manner in which Balot's image was subsumed into Pende agendas. She also notes the dramatic difference between this figure and other Pende objects. In the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, a group of comedic masks appeared that reflected changes in Pende relationships to the colonial regime. These masks exhibit, the author suggests, "a certain ironic detachment from the occupation" (p. 236). Although representations of Europeans and Americans were rare, the laughter such masks inspire are allegories of, in Strother's words, "devouring power" (p. 240) through innovation in representation.



Chapter 7 analyzes the ways that Congolese artists, partially through the encouragement of Belgians and partially after independence, engaged with current events, including colonization and its aftermath. Whether they were critiquing the colonial regime or the government of Zaire, Strother explores how artists employed indirect discourse as their means of expressing criticism. Focusing on Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu's Congo Belge paintings, a popular genre that features an African official flogging a prisoner while women wail and an indifferent Belgian official looks on, Strother notes the subject's attachment to collective memory and trauma as well as wry commentary on the abuses of Zairean Prime Minister Mobutu Sese Seko and his rule. While others have made similar claims about these paintings, Strother's approach differs. Unlike her predecessors, Strother is concerned less with the "accuracy" of the events depicted and more with their reception and evocative force, and rightly so. This reexamination of Congo Belge, along with one of the 1980s and 1990s works of internationally known artist Chéri Samba, allows the author to investigate a Congolese visualization of contemporary relations between Central Africa and the West. Such work, popular at home, also holds appeal for a Western audience that is titillated, perhaps in similar ways to those who commissioned Congolese ivories a century earlier, by the works' piercing humor.

Throughout her text Strother shows how artists have used humor in relation to violence as a means of analysis, of exploring the other, and of indirect discourse. *Humor and Violence* suggests that in the uneven, complicated meetings of Africans and Europeans and, further, in the attempt to critique and make sense of the postcolonial present, artists have been able to establish what we could call an aesthetic of incongruity, one that served many purposes. Whether in the form of humor, satire, or the more straightforward depiction of violence, representations mixing Africans with Europeans, chiefs with commoners, and so on made it possible to articulate the terror, mistrust, and fear that structured so many relationships between Africans and Europeans, while providing routes to psychologically mitigate violence's effects.

Strother is to be commended for her willingness to provide such an unflinching account of violence and the responses it provoked in art and society. On the level of subject matter, *Humor and Violence* can be difficult to read. At times I cringed at images of brutality that spoke of a world of terror that was far worse, as a reporter for the *Times* of London once insisted, than anything Harriet Beecher Stowe detailed in her 1853

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novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[3] Yet, in bringing humor and violence together, Strother reminds us that even in the face of unimaginable horror, humanity is never fully lost. This is a brave, groundbreaking book that resonates deeply with #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and a world that grows increasingly violent every day.

Humor and Violence's depth of research and radical interdisciplinarity is breathtaking. Close looking, rigorous field and archival research, and unusually broad reading in the studies of humor and violence, anthropology and ethnography, art history, African and African American studies, psychoanalysis as well as critical race theory yield a book that leaves no stone unturned in showing complicated and conflicted worlds that drove social and artistic change. This is a social art history, postcolonial art history, and study of reception that teases out the multivalence of these art objects as well as how a broad cast of characters understood one another within the brutal circumstances that surrounded them. Few studies of African art have tackled such a broad terrain so successfully. As an added bonus, the book's detailed, lavish illustrations fully engage with Strother's analysis.

Avoiding binaries or dichotomies, *Humor and Violence* recalls Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of the rhizome.[4] In her book, with its connections of different syntaxes of power, embrace of multiplicity, and surprising ruptures and sutures, Strother has created a compelling map of objects and relations in an intercultural milieu. Yet she balances such rhizomatic movement with a chronological accuracy that is rare in studies of African art. *Humor and Violence* is a model, especially in the age of our global, transcultural present, for how to compellingly write an art history that has myriad, incongruous elements.

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NOTES

1. See Suzanne Preston Blier, "Imagining Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese ca. 1492," *Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (September 1993): 375–96; and Nii Quarcoopome, *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2010). Strother credits a conversation with Quarcoopome as critical to the conception of her book.

2. Strother cited Huey Copeland's talk "In the Shadow of the Negress," which he presented at Columbia University, New York, on December 14, 2015. For a discussion of race and visibility, see Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–97.

3. *Times* (London), December 19, 1902, quoted in E. D. Morel, *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 43.

4. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–25.

DAVID M. LUBIN

Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 384 pp.; 77 color ills, 72 b/w. $41.95

Recent debates over the relation between fact and opinion, encapsulated by the rise of terms such as "post-truth," have important precedents in the history of art and war.[1] A critical moment in this history is the use of modern mass media during World War I. As David Lubin notes in the preface to *Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War*, this was "the first fully industrialized war, and an important aspect of that industrialization was the mass production and dissemination of war-related images" (p. x). In accordance with this assertion about the value and function of culture in the broad sense, Lubin examines in detail not only works of art in traditional mediums but also, and in particular, posters and other objects that previous scholars have too often dismissed as propaganda. As it does so, *Grand Illusions* also takes a larger, thematic view of war-related images produced in the United States between the mid-1910s and the 1930s. Specifically, Lubin aims to consider "an array of 'illusions' that visually defined the First World War experience for Americans" (p. ix). Lubin's use of the term "illusion," borrowed from the title of a 1937 war film directed by Jean Renoir, refers to the ideological obfuscation of cultural nuance that often leads to the justification of war. The illusions discussed range from broad topics, such as race and gender, to more specific ones, such as the disparate influences of masks in modern art and health care.

Lubin's analysis of the illusions tied to the war involves a methodology that the author has recently described elsewhere as "art history as collage."[2] This process takes into account, but is not limited to, the juxtaposition of mass media and high culture. Lubin also draws on social, political, and economic history along with literary analysis to yield a layered argument. By depending on multiple cultural elements, this method demonstrates how seemingly simple images are subconsciously linked not only to one another but also to works ostensibly disconnected from the fight. Patriotism, pro-war fervor, and wartime racial and gender roles are thus revealed as manufactured concepts that share affinities with and develop

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