



***Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, edited by Kathleen Bickford Berzock**

Exh. cat. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 312 pp.; 192 color
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Reviews

EXPANDING ARTISTIC GEOGRAPHIES

KATHLEEN BICKFORD BERZOCK, ED.

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa

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Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa. Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, January 26–July 21, 2019; Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, September 21, 2019–February 23, 2020; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, April 8–November 29, 2020

ALISA LAGAMMA, ED.

Sabel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara

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Sabel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 30–October 26, 2020 (extended due to COVID-19)

“Medieval Africa” is a thought-provoking phrase. From the Enlightenment onward, Africa was considered to be a place without time, first in the “childhood of humanity”—a perpetual state of nature—and then later in a kind of permanent medieval era.¹ Africa was compared to the European Middle Ages in a pejorative sense—as a backward “primitive” place gripped by ritual, evincing the natives’ inability to control their world. The idea that precontact African cultures had their own histories and chronologies was relatively novel even in the late twentieth century, mainly because of the lack of written and material evidence from the time before the Kingdom of Kongo’s coastal contact with the Portuguese in 1483.² The ties between sub-Saharan West Africa and western Europe before the fifteenth century have only recently become a focus of scholarship, developing into a line of inquiry that has played an instrumental role in opening up the (European) Middle Ages to the rest of the world, via what scholars first called the “medieval Mediterranean” and now dub the “global Middle Ages.” These are welcome developments for both African and Western

medieval art history. The two exhibitions discussed here are the most comprehensive treatments of Africa during the Western medieval period (800–1400 CE) to date, bringing together impressive arrays of objects from African, European, and North American collections.³ Their richly illustrated catalogs, covering nearly two thousand years with original scholarly essays by archaeologists, historians, philosophers, and art historians, model the fruits of interdisciplinarity and will be an invaluable point of departure for future research.

In the introductory room of *Sabel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (the Met), the viewer was confronted by a tantalizingly mysterious object: rising nearly six feet into a V shape, it has a lightly worked burnt orange surface that gives it an otherworldly presence. The natural variations in the porous sandstone impart a surface topography that has intensified over time. It is an abstract, sculpturesque cipher: one could be anywhere and nowhere, sensing what deep time feels like in the imagination. The label shared that this is one of a series of monoliths found in Tondidarou (Mali) dating to 280–620 CE. Taken by a French colonial official in 1931, it is now in the collection of the Musée du quai Branly, Paris. We do not know why these monoliths were erected or what they signified, as local tradition and oral history seem to have forgotten their meaning as well. In the exhibition, however, this stone object nonetheless served to dislocate the widespread, erroneous notion that precolonial Africa was an atemporal place. The chronological presentation that followed disrupted the notion of atemporality that the monolith initially appeared to confirm. Indeed, complicating time was a key goal of *Sabel*, which opened on January 30, 2020, only to shutter a few weeks into its run in response to the spread of COVID-19.

On the other hand, the central revelation of *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, which opened in a pre-pandemic world, was one of constant movement, exchange, and communication between West Africa and the rest of the globe (Fig. 1). The visitor began in the present by viewing an atmospheric video of the contemporary Sahara; occasionally the low flutter of the

wind skimming across the sand was heard. This was an exhibition about rearranging our relationship to what we understand as “sub-Saharan Africa,” a term that creates an artificial separation between the lands north and south of the Sahara, which has historically been thought of as a barrier. *Caravans* rejects this canard and demonstrates that the desert was a vital highway, comparable to the Silk Road, that connected sub-Saharan Africa with its northern neighbors on the continent, the western Mediterranean, and as far east as India and China. (“Sahel” refers to the southern edge of the Sahara and means “shore” in Arabic.) Early on in the exhibition, which assembled over two hundred objects ranging from the extraordinary bronzes from Igbo-Ukwu (ninth–tenth century) to Parisian ivories (thirteenth century), the viewer was presented with a case of delicate fragments. Among them were a trapezoidal shard of a Qingbai porcelain bowl (tenth–twelfth century) and a frayed section of silk dated to fourteenth-century China, which were both excavated in the important port city of Tadmekka in Mali. Together they express the variety and quality of goods that were available and traded in the Mali empire (thirteenth–sixteenth century).

The titles of the two exhibitions reveal their ambitions: the complication of time in the Met’s show was simultaneously insistently about place, as well as about the monuments that express a place’s situatedness in a historical continuum. On the other hand, *Caravans* was about potentiality, the ability of an iridescent chip of pottery to conjure an alien world, which today we can only resuscitate partially, hazily, and with more questions than certainties. This capability for resonance, for fragments to transport us to realms and realities long extinguished, is the great success of the latter exhibition. Like the museumgoer in 2019, the medieval consumer in one of the bustling markets at the lip of the desert also would have had to piece together the place and people that had generated the vessel they received in exchange for gold, ivory, leather, or Saharan rock salt, the now-forgotten preciousness of which is emphasized by both exhibitions.⁴

These exhibitions compelled visitors to consider what has been forgotten, to take into account the crucial role of oral cultures in filling the void and the nomadic peoples

who were vital to the production and circulation of the items on display. What could a Sahelian have known about the distant lands from which objects like the porcelain bowl or the silk cloth had traveled? Perhaps the objects’ trader, most likely a nomad, had a tale to accompany their wares, or perhaps the vessel’s materials and artistry were enough to arrest attention. Now, however, we are fundamentally presented with a series of untethered forms, which we can overlay with meaning from distinct epistemes: archaeology, oral history, epigraphy, primary sources, and anthropology. The medieval period in Africa, which both these exhibitions take as their overarching framework, is rich with formal innovations and “masterpieces,” though they are mostly depleted of original meaning; these were not text-based communities (with the exception of the priestly and aristocratic classes that converted to Islam) diligently writing down what they were doing for posterity. In the Western tradition, by contrast, there is the astonishingly detailed twelfth-century account of Abbot Suger of Saint Denis, patron of the royal burial church just outside of Paris.⁵ Yet primary sources that explicitly address art and architecture frequently do not engage with our questions, frustrating art historians. *Caravans* teaches us that the gold and ivory used in the fabrication of European reliquaries and liturgical vessels were procured from the trans-Saharan trade, but the exhibition stops short of making an interpretive leap that would assign meaning to this mutual exchange. Is it possible that the strength and longevity of trans-Saharan trade (which has been traced to at least as far back as the Romans) was so

essential that contemporaries might not have marveled the way we do at their globalized world? Trade in luxury goods might have been so frequent that it literally became *unremarkable*, which is not to say that these items were not highly valued. Western European medieval sources valued the rarity of materials such as gold and ivory but seemed to be less conscious of how they were procured.⁶

Sources from the period prominently comment on the role of nomads as the intermediaries of exchange. There are two iconic “accounts” of the Mali empire from the fourteenth century, and both are from foreign perspectives: the first is the famous travelogue of the Tunisian globe-trotter Ibn Battuta (1352–54) and the second is Abraham Cresques’s *Catalan Atlas* (1375). The former is a textual firsthand account and the latter is visual, likely based on a compendium of tropes drawn from classical sources along with secondhand contemporary accounts of the then known world. The figure of the nomad appears in both. In Cresques’s map, a heavily veiled nomad on a camel approaches a seated sovereign. This is Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali (r. ca. 1280–1337) who was thought to be the richest man in the world on account of the gold that he controlled. The light-skinned nomad is portrayed of equal size to the ruler, whereas the emperor is dark skinned, seated on a plush red cushion, and carrying the familiar insignia of *European* royalty: a fleur-de-lis scepter, a golden orb, and a crown. Behind the nomad there is an encampment of black tents, modeled after European military tents—meant for temporary occupation during a campaign—rather than actual nomadic



1 *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, installation view, Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2019 (photograph provided by Block Museum of Art)

tents, which are intended for year-round habitation. The tents are of the same scale as the rider and ruler, and so it becomes clear that each aspect of the trio is conceived to be of commensurate importance. The accompanying inscription highlights this point: “The region is inhabited by people who go heavily veiled, so that nothing can be seen of them but their eyes. They live in tents and ride on camels” (translated in Berzock, 26). Ibn Battuta’s account of his travels in this region similarly confirms the importance of nomads in the facilitation of the movement of goods and people that enabled the wealth of the empire. Referring to the famed Tuareg nomads, he wrote, “The caravan cannot travel except under their protection; and amongst them the protection of a woman is more important than that of a man. They are nomads, they do not stay in one place.”⁷

The role of nomadic cultures in the maintenance of the mobility of goods and people in the medieval Sahara was regrettably addressed only obliquely in both exhibitions, through the inclusion of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artifacts made by the Tuareg people, who are Muslim and a subsection of the Berber ethnic group, which exerted significant influence in North Africa during the time period. In *Caravans*, for example, medieval terra-cotta sculptures of kneeling warriors, each with a small dagger strapped to the left arm, are juxtaposed with a Tuareg arm dagger that dates from the late nineteenth century. Ordinarily, the projection of modern ethnography back centuries has been considered a dubious strategy for manufacturing meaning in the absence of other documentation.⁸ In this case, a meaningful juxtaposition is aided by the archaeological record, which yields a knife blade found in the important trading city of Tadmekka and manufactured in a manner that is very close to the nineteenth-century Tuareg knife. Furthermore, there is a built-in consistency to nomadic cultures: over a period of time they invent a lifestyle that requires little adjustment, since it is tailored precisely to the natural exigencies of the desert and the herd. It is probable that the Tuareg had more in common with their medieval ancestors than twentieth-century Bamana people (in contemporary Mali) did with theirs, even though this lineage of indigeneity is one of the underlying

arguments in the Met exhibition, which I will discuss further below.

While *Caravans* reveled in the complexity and confusion that accompanies the converging of cultures often mediated by nomadic traders, *Sahel* erected invisible boundaries that separated foreign elements, including Islam, from the indigenous cultures that Muslims might have encountered in West Africa in the seventh century. This difference made itself felt in the way the two exhibitions were organized spatially. *Sahel* was laid out across a central axis, which functioned as a kind of nave uniting and separating the ancillary spaces on either side (Fig. 2). Down this central corridor were pairs of noble equestrian figures in terra-cotta and wood, ranging from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries, culminating in an open platform (or altar) featuring canonical sculptures from the Bamana and Dogon ethnic groups (both from Mali). On either side of this central cavalcade the exhibition had two subsidiary organizational axes, one thematic (including “Epic Poetry and Architecture,” “Trade and Islam,” and “Archaeology”) and the other chronological by empire (Ghana, ca. 300–1200; Mali, ca. 1230–1600; Songhay, ca. 1464–1591; Bamana Segu, ca. 1712–1861; and the Umarian state, ca. 1850–90). The theme titles also refer to the sources that furnished the exhibition’s evidence of dates, historical markers, and people; the slippery nature of the material record necessitates that a great range of disciplines be brought together for the viewer to have a sense of the lived environment of the medieval Sahel (and Sahara). As in

many oral cultures, the objects themselves are primary sources that can be examined alongside the written record provided by Muslim travelers—thus, from the perspective of a visitor rather than an inhabitant (although this division becomes increasingly meaningless after the time when Muslims settled in African cities, from at least the eighth century to the present).

It is important to recognize that many of the objects on display in *Sahel*, specifically the terra-cotta figures, have come to light only since the late 1970s to early 1980s.⁹ Several emerged through looting, which *Sahel* acknowledged in the label that accompanied a video of a trench at Jenne-Jeno, an important archaeological site under the supervision of Roderick McIntosh (also a catalog author) that is being properly excavated.¹⁰ Curators in the field of African art, recognizing that illegitimately procured materials have been circulating on the market for years, can refuse to show objects that do not have a verifiable provenance, as Berzock did in *Caravans*. LaGamma brought together scientifically recovered objects from the National Museum of Mali in Bamako, for example, alongside others without such documentation; other institutions have declined to exhibit such works.¹¹

That said, the impressive presentation of the terra-cotta figures in *Sahel* rewarded repeated and comparative viewing in the round. The groupings were determined by stylistic similarities, and for those who had seen most of these sculptures previously only in reproduction, viewing same with same was illuminating. The “Middle Niger” (ninth–fourteenth century) figures share an



2 *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara*, installation view, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2020 (photograph provided by Metropolitan Museum of Art)

expressive elongation of torso and limbs; the pliability of the body seems to reveal the receptivity of the spirit and mind to a higher force. Perhaps these figures are visual prayers, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne suggests in the catalog, pleading for resilience in the face of turmoil, as many are covered in raised disks that might indicate a disease (page TK).¹² Diagne connects these figures to the Bamana concept of *nyama*, an ontological life force that charges and recedes as a spiritual current animating the material world. He suggests that this generative force is the bridge between seemingly unrelated cultures in time and space, from the show's opening megalith to the last object in the exhibition, the vaguely anthropomorphic mass additively built with magico-religious and sacrificial materials known as a *boli*, which was the epitome of power and secrecy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bamana culture. The label for the *boli* asserted that it expressed indigenous resistance to the iconoclasm of nineteenth-century Muslim reformist Umar Tal.¹³

This production of a totalizing vision of Bamana culture leads to one of the more important questions raised by both exhibitions—namely, the relationship between historical cultures and the arrival of Islam on the African continent in the seventh century. The field of African art has long endured being in a defensive position because of the entrenched racial theories that were manufactured during the trans-Atlantic slave trade to justify the commodification of Black people. These ideas not only furnished further rationalization for the subjugation of the African continent during the colonial period; they also continued to inflect attitudes that colonial officials, and later amateur ethnographers and archaeologists, brought to bear on the art and material culture they encountered. These mostly male individuals could not fathom how “primitive” Africans could have mastered lost-wax casting, which yielded the supple, naturalistic busts of kings and queens from Ile-Ife (present-day Nigeria) and the hyper-realistic vessels and animals from nearby Igbo-Ukwu (ninth–tenth century), which were some of the extraordinary loans from Nigeria featured in *Caravans*. Early ethnographers were so incredulous at the possibility of autochthonous creative and technical knowledge that Leo Frobenius proposed the theory that Ile-Ife must have had links

to the vanished civilization of Atlantis and that Africans learned these technologies and styles from the ancient Greeks.¹⁴ Racialized thought coupled with a lack of regard for the independent ingenuity that produced the art now considered canonical and indispensable to the development of Euro-American modernism continue to inflect perceptions of African art. However, it is also possible to re-create the same trap: the production of new narratives and interpretations can invoke the ghost of Frobenius. This has become a Gordian knot for African art, especially in universal museums, which bear the burden (and responsibility) of addressing a general public.

Regarding this issue, *Sahel* seemed to be at odds with itself, a point evident in the layout of the exhibition and the essays in the catalog. They separate Islam from “traditional” cultures, valorizing local invention as resistant to invaders. In her interpretation of the Middle Niger terra-cottas, LaGamma argues that these figures might have been made as votives, “to enlist the intervention of a divine audience to redress and dispel an unknown but looming existential crisis,” and goes on to conclude, “There are signs that over time such representations were discarded by their owners or were the target of iconoclasm by outsiders” (107). Given the overlap of the onset of Islam and the date of the terra-cottas, the suggestion is that these outsiders were Muslim. In contrast, other essays in the lushly illustrated catalog—for example, the one by Paulo F. de Moraes Farias—insist that “it makes no historical sense to oppose what is West African to what is Islamic” (110).¹⁵ Farias’s wide-ranging

and precise analysis of the existing evidence reveals the inescapable hybridity of the Sahel as a region. He points to the anachronistic archetype of an exploitative and destructive Islam, based on the much later French colonial model of the *mission civilisatrice* that has been extended to the medieval past. His essay shows, as he says, that “Islam was not imposed on the South Sahara and Sahel by conquering armies. Rather, people in those regions freely imported it and made it one of the religions of Black Africa” (110). Yet in *Sahel*’s galleries there was a distinct separation of Islam from the African empires the show chronicled, even though the majority of objects in the exhibition dated from the time period *after* the arrival of Islam.

This artificial cleavage seemed to exist in order to define a classical period in African art, akin to what we mean by “classicism” with regard to ancient Greece: an art that has widely recognizable attributes based on a consensus idealization of the body. Classicism also has implications of an art that is self-generated, that is novel yet grounded in place and time and resolved in a manner that protects it from outside actors. Yet if the Middle Niger works are “classical,” then the term needs to be revised; this art is hybrid, a permutation of local and alien forces that are evident in the forms themselves and confirmed by the archaeological record. Among the most compelling examples is a figure that reclines on its left arm, arms clasped in a commanding gesture that stabilizes and frames the exposed rotund torso and breasts while the lower body is covered in an elegantly pleated wrapper (Fig. 3). The figure has a dagger strapped to



3 *Reclining Figure*, Middle Niger, Jenne-Jeno, Mali, 12th–14th century, excavated in 1981, terracotta. Musée National du Mali, Bamako (photograph provided by Metropolitan Museum of Art)

its left arm and is bedecked with bracelets and necklaces. One necklace is made of beads of various sizes and shapes, perhaps fruits of trans-Saharan trade, and from the other hangs a butterfly-shaped pectoral that rests between the breasts. It is unlike any of the other supine figures in the exhibition, and perhaps the richly adorned male/female form is representative of the equanimity between genders that characterized this culture. Catalog essay authors Roderick McIntosh and Mamadou Cissé understand the figure as “an indication of complexification” at Jenne-Jeno (62), but they stop short of relating it to the streams of heterogeneous influences made possible through trade and Muslim merchants.¹⁶

The display of such objects as the terra-cotta figures in *Sahel* fostered a series of revelatory insights, but it did not emphasize them adequately for a nonspecialist audience. Prominent among these was the role of gender in the production of artistic culture. The long-standing gendered division of materials and labor is well known in West Africa; for example, women control clay, whereas men handle metal. Marla Berns was the first to convincingly argue that the medieval terra-cottas were most likely made by women, which means that at least a third of the exhibition featured work authored by women. Only a single object label made this point in the exhibition.¹⁷ The other vital role of women in this period was in facilitating the transmission of commodities, people, and ideas via trans-Saharan trade. In order for the inhospitable, daunting expanse of the Sahara to become a “highway,” as both exhibitions justifiably asserted, individuals with deep knowledge of the hidden sources of sustenance in the desert were essential. Nomads, such as the Tuareg, have relied on the gendered division of labor for centuries. Men look after the herd while women process the raw materials that the herd yields to make the tents, enabling the welfare of the family. The home, the tent, is the dominion of women and so they have not only fashioned its architectural envelope but also owned it.¹⁸ Had this complexity been introduced prominently in *Sahel*, it might have given visitors a more nuanced sense of what the Sahel and the medieval Sahara had looked like.

Both exhibitions also prompted viewers to regularly question periodicity and rethink what is meant by “medieval.” Conventionally

within the context of western Europe, “medieval” signifies a transitional period of distance from the classical past, a break or lapse of sorts, before the resuscitation of Greco-Roman antiquity we call the Renaissance. In its early historiography, the medieval period—precisely because of its invention of new forms understood as a rejection of classical ideals—was deemed “primitive” and “barbarous.”¹⁹ Indeed, during the colonial period, it was used as a model with which to assess African art upon its introduction to Europeans through ethnographic museums and later dealers and modernist artists. These charges have long since been rejected for both African and medieval art, so it is exciting to compare the world of the Sahel to the Western medieval period as they existed coevally, rather than comparing the histories of their later receptions. It also becomes clear that we need to reconsider the migration of the term “medieval” to the Sahel, as both exhibitions reveal that the ninth through fourteenth centuries correspond more to a “golden age” or “classical” period for the region, as François-Xavier Fauvelle has proposed.²⁰

This reasoning moves us away from the cyclical, biological models of time on which the discipline of art history is historically based and which it has struggled to discard. However, the term “classical” can still be useful for the terra-cottas, since they demonstrate the characteristics that that term implies: aesthetic intention and unity across media and at every level of execution, as well as a self-conscious expression of a culture’s unique visual identity tethered to a consensus of meaning. Of course, these traits are evident in Romanesque and Gothic Europe, too, and so we must recognize that every time and place has its own “classical” expression at varying times, and that classicism can be considered a measure of consensus of what a culture or society wants to say about itself, to itself and to others.

And herein is the most crucial difference between *Sahel* and *Caravans*: *Sahel* did not engage with the potential of what these cultures and empires had to say to the wider world (with which they were meaningfully engaged), whereas *Caravans* continually posed questions around what these coeval cultures wanted to communicate about themselves to one another. The great strength of *Caravans*

is its presentation of thresholds of possibility, which plants questions in the viewer’s mind: what did it mean that the ivory and gold used in the most sumptuous and important artworks in western Europe came from Africa? Did users and makers of the reliquaries, salt cellars, narrative ivories, and other luxury equipment assign a meaning to these materials that tied them to their places of origin? Perhaps the most important lesson here is the acknowledgment that medieval Christian rituals and royal power were inextricably bound to trans-Saharan trade. The splendor of ivory and gold, which lent legitimacy to rulers and their courts along with saints and their churches, would have been impossible without Africa, as Sarah Guérin argues in the *Caravans* catalog (175–220).

In the last room of *Caravans*, the viewer was given the clearest indication of the process of meaningful exchange between Africa and Europe through a series of monumental ewers, manufactured in England in the fourteenth century (before the first contact on the West African coast with the Portuguese) and taken from Ghana as trophies by colonial British officials during the Anglo-Asante war of 1896 (Fig. 4). Cast from a copper alloy, these vessels on their own do not communicate the wealth of information that we glean from the catalog: they were made for King



4 Asante Jug (*Richard II Ewer*), Manhiya Palace, Kumasi, Asante Region, Ghana, 1390–99, copper alloy. British Museum, London (photograph by the author)

Richard II and most likely made their way to West Africa “as diplomatic gifts for an Akan dignitary,” as Raymond Silverman conjectures in the catalog (265).²¹ They also fittingly mark the beginning of trade over sea rather than land, which eventually led to chattel slavery and colonial conquest, two erasures of indigenous autonomy that led to so many of the gaps in knowledge that these exhibitions earnestly tried to recuperate. Like the crafting of memory itself, the act of remembering the past must be partial and incomplete, so that it can be fashioned anew for future generations, as Mary Carruthers has shown for the medieval period.²² Mnemonic flexibility is also essential to oral cultures, who remember through speech and performance rather than text. The *Caravans* installation made history’s pliancy apparent by privileging open sight lines, which in turn encourage nonlinear connections and the pursuit of hybridity that evidently animated the people of the Sahel, the Sahara, and Europe during the Middle Ages.

RISHAM MAJEED is assistant professor of art history at Ithaca College [Department of Art History, 953 Danby Road, Ithaca, NY 14850].

NOTES

1. The Portuguese sailors who arrived on the west coast of Africa compared the rituals they observed to the superstition of the peasantry back home, a point that William Pietz has explored in great detail in his indispensable articles “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17; “The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987): 23–45; and “The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman’s Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16 (Autumn 1988): 105–24. For theories of race and the development of scientific race theory, see Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Recent scholarship emerging from medieval studies and literary history has put forth claims that the notion of “racism” is a premodern concept. See especially Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Pamela Patton, “Blackness, Whiteness, and the Idea of Race in Medieval European Art,” in *Whose Middle Ages?*, ed. Andrew Albin et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 154–65.
2. See Robert Farris Thompson, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981); Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom*

of Kongo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Alisa LaGamma, ed., *Kongo: Power and Majesty* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015).

3. This review is based on the installation of *Caravans of Gold* at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University.
4. Both shows also repeat Arab travelers’ accounts when they marvel at the notion that salt was traded for gold, implying that equivalent amounts were traded. For a different account of this exchange, see Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 49.
5. See Erwin Panofsky, ed. and trans., *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Recent literature on Suger acknowledges the inflated nature of his prose.
6. It could be that the emphasis on the rarity of materials was a kind of “code” for their exotic origins. See John G. Hawthorne and Cyril Stanley Smith, trans., *Theophilus: On Divers Arts* (New York: Dover, 1963), 118–21.
7. Said Hamdun and Noël King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2010), 67.
8. Bernard de Grunne, who is both a scholar and an art dealer, has attempted to find explanations of the gestures found in the Middle Niger terra-cottas by interviewing contemporary Bamana and Dogon men in his book *Djenné-Jeno: 1000 Years of Terracotta Statuary in Mali* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). This method would be the equivalent of interviewing a contemporary inhabitant of Chartres, France, to explain the sculptures of the twelfth–thirteenth century cathedral.
9. See the catalog of the important exhibition that showed this material for the first time: *Vallées du Niger* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993).
10. See Roderick J. McIntosh and Susan Keech McIntosh, “Dilettantism and Plunder: Illicit Traffic in Ancient Malian Art,” *Museum International* 38, no. 1 (1986): 49–57; and Kristina van Dyck, “Demanding Objects: Malian Antiquities and Western Scholarship,” in “Museums: Crossing Boundaries,” special issue, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (Autumn 2007): 141–52.
11. One of the Middle Niger sculptures shown in *Sahel* went straight from the exhibition to the auction house Sotheby’s, where it was lot number 10 from the collection of Sidney and Bernice Clyman, with an estimated value of \$250,000–\$350,000. It was purchased for \$412,500 on June 30, 2020, which is particularly curious since the exhibition was originally scheduled to run until August 2020; the label states “Collection of Sidney and Bernice Clyman (1982–2020)” without further explanation. The Met’s exhibition legitimated and heightened the stature of the figure for sale. A label in the same case offered, “The interpretive potential of such ancient creations has been severely compromised by their lack of archeological provenance. To ignore their existence is, however, to deny one of the most significant moments in Sahelian creative expression.” This conjunction is evasive in the manner in which it elides recent calls for repatriation of ill-procured African art. See Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, November 2018, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf. For a response to the report, see Z. S. Strother, “Eurocentrism Still Sets the Terms of Restitution of African Art,” *Art Newspaper*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/eurocentrism-still-defines-african-art>.
12. See also Peter Garlake, *Early Art and Architecture of Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
13. The accompanying label stated, “Umar tal smashed Segu’s ‘idols’ and its capital transitioned from a stronghold of traditional belief to that of the Umarian Islamic regime. Only thirty years later, Umarian colonization was replaced by that of the French.”
14. Leo Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach* (Berlin: Vita, Deutsches Verlagshaus, 1912). See also J. M. Ita, “Frobenius in West African History,” *Journal of African History* 13, no. 4 (1972): 673–88; and Suzanne Marchand, “Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (April 1997): 153–70.
15. On the hybridity of cross-cultural encounter, see especially Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
16. It is equally difficult to define the visual characteristics of Islamic art in the decades of its arrival in the Sahel, as it was itself in the process of self-definition. This question of what, if anything, is “Islamic” about Islamic art led Oleg Grabar to continually advocate for understanding it in terms of strategic hybridity in his now classic study, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973). An example of this in *Sahel* was the wall-size replica of minarets at the Great Mosque in Djenné, Mali. The gallery facing this reproduction displayed a series of the Middle Niger terra-cottas, which visually rhymed with the architecture. The strong formal and material relationship between the architecture, which is Islamic, and sculpture, which is not, shows that this was a culture of strategic hybridity. On the historiography of the Djenné mosque, originally built in the thirteenth century, see Jean-Louis Bourgeois, “The History of the Great Mosques of Djenné,” *African Arts* 20, no. 3 (May 1987): 54–63, 90–92.
17. According to *Sahel’s* label, “In Mande society, clay has historically been a major medium of creative expression identified with female expertise. Women’s mastery of sophisticated techniques of forming and firing clay parallels that of men’s manipulation of iron ore through smithing. Given that these gendered specializations go back as far as anyone can remember, it has been proposed that female authors produced the full array of Middle Niger ritual ceramics, including figurative representations.” Marla Berns pointed this out over thirty years ago when she argued that the likely female authorship of the celebrated terra-cottas had been ignored by the male-dominated field of archaeology and had been affected by the art historical biases toward certain materials that fall within the domain of “craft” versus “art.” Berns, “Art, History, and Gender: Women and Clay in West Africa,” *African Archaeological Review* 11 (1993): 129–48. In the *Sahel* catalog’s short section on this question (in “Middle Niger Authorship,” 104–5), LaGamma agrees with the work of Barbara E. Frank, concluding, “The mastery of sophisticated techniques of forming and firing clay by

female specialists paralleled the prerogative of men to manipulate iron ore through smithing. That basic complementarity is reflected in the fact that Mande potters are usually married to blacksmiths” (104). See Frank, “Thoughts on Who Made the Jenné Terra-cottas: Gender, Craft Specialization, and Mande Art History,” in “Gender in the Mande World,” special issue, *Mande Studies* 4 (2002): 121–32.

18. In *Sahel*, with regard to Tuareg women’s roles, the label accompanying a spectacular leather bag offered, “In Berber-speaking Tuareg society women decorate the leather saddlebags used to carry salt during migrations across the desert. They work the goatskin with impressed, stitched, or excised motifs, and attach tassels and fringe that shake with the camel’s movement for added visual impact.” A viewer with no further knowledge of nomadic life is left with the mistaken impression that Tuareg women were the decorators of nomadic life rather than the producers of the very element that enables nomadic life: the moveable home, the tent. On the role of women in nomadic architecture, see Labelle Prussin, *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place, Gender* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1995); and Risham Majeed, ed., *Made to Move: African Nomadic Design*, exh. cat. (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca College Press, 2017).

19. On the interrelationship between the receptions of medieval and African art, see Risham Majeed, “Against Primitivism: Meyer Schapiro’s Early Writings on African and Romanesque Art,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 71/72 (Spring/Autumn 2019): 295–311.

20. Fauvelle argues, “Even if the sources relating to the ‘dark centuries’ of African history are rare and uncertain, the period would surely better merit the name of ‘golden age.’ As far as clichés go, the latter is more accurate: our meager sources tell us that the Africa of this period was home to powerful and prosperous states, and that it integrated itself into some of the great currents of global exchange that circulated people, merchandise, and religious conceptions.” François-Xavier Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, trans. Troy Tice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

21. This theory was first proposed by Malcolm McLeod, a curator at the British Museum.

22. Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen, 1982).

STEPHEN J. CAMPBELL

The Endless Periphery: Toward a Geopolitics of Art in Lorenzo Lotto’s Italy
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Imagine Italy around 1350 as a constellation of maritime cosmopolitan cities with commercial and cultural connections throughout the Mediterranean and the Levant. Locals, immigrants, and foreigners interact in a variety of languages. Then fast-forward to the end of the sixteenth century, when the Tuscan language had triumphed and a multiplicity of vernaculars had been reduced to dialects. Florence, Rome, and Venice have dominated the peninsula, their cultural, economic, political, and territorial power furthered by the instrumental role of art in their state apparatuses. While expanding their influence on the mainland, these centers attribute the failure of coastal cities (aside from Venice) to their pluralism and international outlook. Divisions between north and south are accentuated, borders harden, and the peninsula is increasingly defined in nationalistic terms. The centrifugal sway of these metropolises has intensified as smaller cities have been annexed. State-run offices foster patriotism through diverse forms of cultural propaganda about ancient ancestry, artistic genius born from local soil, and the prestige of luxury goods manufactured locally. Differences are suppressed, and foreigners are surveilled.

There is resistance to the tyranny of homogeneity, however. In Stephen J. Campbell’s timely analysis of the “geopolitics of art”—a phrase he employs to refer both to the forces that realigned artistic production during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and to the historiographical legacy of this realignment—resistance to political centralization and artistic schools can be found in places, such as Messina, Varallo, Brescia, Bergamo, Milan, and Urbino, that become less visible as the Rome-Florence axis strengthens. Diverse points of view reverberate in strategic citations and purposeful reinventions, in uses of geometry that accentuate everyday movements of bodies and thereby defy grace, in styles that are radical, and in the meaning, substance, and placelessness of styles that refuse to be reduced to provincial versions of Roman, Tuscan, or Venetian models.

To be attuned to plural voices, drowned out by Giorgio Vasari and Ludovico Dolce (among many others) and by academies and institutions, and in this way contest homogeneity, is an imperative also for the art historian, as Campbell’s impressive undertaking in *The Endless Periphery: Toward a Geopolitics of Art in Lorenzo Lotto’s Italy* demonstrates. If the breadth and depth of his expertise are not easily duplicated, his appeal to make sense of artifacts that do not fit the terms and categories devised by partisan voices is open to all of us. Concerning the *paragone*, for example, he asks, “When critical terms have become familiar and banal, to what extent are they really useful for understanding ambitious art?” (228). Questioning the interpretive value ascribed to treatises, he advocates for “a subtler view, which might read Renaissance critical theory and artistic practice in a more antagonistic and dialectical vein” (228). Challenging the authority ascribed to paradigms forged in Florence, Rome, and Venice, Campbell entreats readers to acknowledge differences and to withstand from incorporating them as provincial, less successful versions of the same. For such histories—as underscored by “endless” in Campbell’s title—are always provisional and can never be fully known from a single perspective.

The groundwork for the book was laid by the four Louise Smith Bross Lectures in Chicago in 2012, the ideas for which Campbell developed during an extended period of research in North American museums where acquisitions were often less beholden to Vasari’s narrative. As Campbell writes in his preface, such works “beckon to us less in their typicality than in their strangeness, in their flouting of long-standing historiographical constructions of Renaissance art—in their challenge to tell a different story” (xviii). In this there are echoes, for this reader, of Michael Fried’s observations on the relative unfamiliarity of Adolf Menzel’s work in the English-speaking West before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the challenge presented by Menzel’s work to understandings of realism conditioned by canonical writers such as John Ruskin.¹ Campbell similarly urges us not to look askance at the unfamiliar, nor to hurry toward predictable conclusions. Instead of the singular, typically heroic narrative