

Artistry of the Everyday: Beauty and Craftsmanship in Berber Art.* Lisa Bernasek. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, 2008. 128 pp.

Reviewed by Myriem Naji

Between December 2004 and August 2006 Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology opened an exhibition entitled "Imazighen! Beauty and Artisanship in Berber Life." This exhibition was curated by Lisa Bernasek and Susan Gilson Miller. Bernasek is an anthropologist who spent two years living as a Peace Corps volunteer in Southeastern Morocco and studied Berber cultural identity in Morocco and Paris. Miller is the director of the Moroccan studies program at Harvard University. The exhibition served to explore the previously never displayed collection of Berber (or Amazigh) art in the Peabody Museum. In the foreword to this book, Miller states that the exhibition was conceived in the spirit of the ongoing public debate currently taking place in North Africa and in the Berber migrant population in Europe and the United States about "what exactly constitutes Berber cultural identity" (p. xiii). In curating the exhibition, Bernasek and Miller set out to explore "one of the key contexts in which the current Berber cultural renaissance has unfolded—the area of artistic production—by highlighting outstanding examples from the Peabody collection" (p. xiii).

Unlike the vast majority of the contemporary literature on Berber arts, which uses the ethnographic present and portrays Berber societies as geographically isolated, living in a timeless traditional culture and preserved from the influence of the market, this book demonstrates the role of tourist, commoditized, or ethnographic objects in the production of ethnicity and authenticity under colonial rule. In addition, Bernasek always provides the reader with a short overview of the political, economic, and social context of contemporary Berber societies in which the production and consumption of material culture takes place.

The three main chapters of this book correspond to three different geographical areas as well as to the chronology of the acquisition of the objects at the Peabody Museum: Kabylia in North Eastern Algeria, the Rif in Northern Morocco, and the Tuareg territories of the Algerian Sahara. Each chapter can be read separately as they constitute, in themselves, an introduction to the material culture of each region.

After a short introduction on Berber art, the second chapter provides valuable information on tourist art (pottery, textiles, and jewelry) in Kabylia. This first collection of objects was purchased by several families from Boston, Massachusetts, who had enjoyed leisure trips to Algeria and who had donated the items over several generations.

Chapter 3 concerns the collection gathered by Carleton Stevens Coon (1904-81), a physical and social anthropologist and archaeologist who was first attracted to the Rif and its inhabitants because of their reputation for independence and resistance. The pottery, leatherwork, and clothing that he collected were meant to represent some aspects of Riffian life and craftsmanship.

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Bernasek also presents a vivid account of a very interesting Riffian character, the friend and assistant of Coon, Mohammed Limnibhy.

Chapter 4 covers the collection of Tuareg art donated by anthropologist Lloyd Cabot Briggs (1909-75) who, as part of his lifelong project on prehistory and contemporary life of the Sahara, acquired material evidence of the Tuareg way of life between 1947 and 1962. This collection rivals that of major ethnographic museums in Europe (Quai Branly in Paris, Musée d'Ethnographie in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, and Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren, Belgium) and Algeria (Bardo Museum in Algier). Bernasek argues that a comparison of these collections reveals a "canon" of Tuareg art established by early-20th century collectors. Indeed all these objects were acquired in the same period from many economically distressed Kel Ahaggar nobles who, due to economic and political changes brought by colonialism, were forced to sell their finest possessions to French army officers and colonial administrators.

In showing how these objects were acquired and what the motivations of their collectors were, she highlights the selective and incomplete nature of museum collections. No longer everyday objects used by indigenous societies, themselves adapting to changing demands and economic needs, these objects became souvenirs, curiosities, decorative objects, or ethnographic artifacts. Bernasek succeeds in deconstructing the paradigm of authenticity and the romanticism of the Peabody Museum's collectors. For example, despite his awareness of the romantic images of the Tuareg (mysterious, camel riding warriors of the desert), the anthropologist Briggs still collected objects related to these images: Tuareg weaponry, saddles and other camel accoutrements, tents, jewelry, etc.

The final chapter on contemporary Berber art is disappointingly short. Bernasek argues that Berber arts are now represented globally on the Internet, in the United States and in Europe, and reappropriated by artists and Berber activists. One would have hoped to read more about the use of Berber art in the production of ethnic and religious identities by migrants of North African origin living in Paris, which is one of Bernasek's areas of expertise. Apart from two photographs taken in Paris by the author, the book does not provide recent pictures of material culture in any of the three North African regions covered. Given the emphasis on the Amazigh renaissance and the recognition of the dynamism of Berber art, such a contrast of the Peabody collection with contemporary material culture would have highlighted continuities and differences.

Twenty-five superb color plates each with their accompanying text on the facing page occupy roughly half of the book. The plates are very carefully referenced in the text of the five chapters, which also include color photographs of objects and some archival photographs with extensive captions. Together these photographs provide a rich sampling of the diversity of Berber arts. The Museum houses more than 450 items that can be viewed online.¹

The great value of this accessible and well-researched book, apart from informing us about the content of an unknown collection, is that it succeeds in providing the best introduction to Berber arts in the English language to date. The detailed notes (pp. 112-121) demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the relevant scholarship and are useful for those interested in investigating further the material culture and ethnography of North Africa (particularly Morocco and Algeria).

Note

1. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology's online collections database can be found at <http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/37>, accessed February 3, 2010.

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