

The Cutting Edge: West Central African 19th Century Throwing Knives in the National Museum of Ethnology Leiden.* A. M. Schmidt and Peter Westerdijk. Leiden: National Museum of Ethnology and C. Zwartenkot Art Books, 2006. 112 pp.

Reviewed by Patrick McNaughton

African throwing knives reside in that realm of especially imaginative human creations where expertise and experimentation have led to something amazing. They are clearly the product of much thought and hard labor, and it is certain that many minds contributed to their refinement and the multitude of specific types over decades and centuries. Indeed, a proliferation of deeply creative forms and conceptualizations of weapons, objects of stature, and symbols of leadership constitute an important chapter in the history of central African expressive culture. These objects—framed in highly effective iron technology and frequently exercised aesthetic acumen—fascinated Europeans, who seem to have begun collecting them and much other amazing weaponry as soon as their beachheads of trade and “exploration” were established. Many European (and even American) museums now have outstanding collections dating from the second half of the 19th century, thanks to these early Western enthusiasts.

The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden has a very rich collection, consisting of 121 throwing knives and related objects. The vast majority were acquired originally by employees of the Dutch New African Trade Association, and then donated or sold to the museum either by the collectors or their heirs. The collection recently received en masse attention from the museum’s conservation department, after which an exhibition and catalog were devoted to it.

The catalog is a terse but welcome addition to our literature on these artistic objects. Following a Forward by the museum’s director, S. B. Engelsman, the curator of the African collections, Annette Schmidt contributes a chapter on the history of the throwing knife collection, and the well-known scholar of African weapons, Peter Westerdijk, provides an overview on this category of object. There follows a catalog that includes 76 objects from the collection, two of which are shields and several of which are not throwing knives but rather closely related objects. There is also a map, which could be more detailed, and a good bibliography provided by Westerdijk.

The catalog photographs—a mixture of black and white and color, with some close-up shots included—are lush and detailed (and large), giving these weapons a vibrant presence in the catalog. This is not a publication aimed at contributing profoundly to scholarship—it is too short and generalized for that, although it is certainly very useful to all students of African material culture, iron working, and weapons. Rather it provides access to holdings in the National Museum that are probably not well known to the public. That makes the beautiful photographs particularly useful. The chapters by Schmidt and Westerdijk achieve the right tone of offering a

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sense of how this collection was put together and why the knives are such interesting and important objects.

The catalog provides accession data, and includes object descriptions that range from one or two sentences to rather detailed paragraphs. The detailed descriptions are a valuable educational feature, and fit very well with a section of Westerdijk's text in which he describes the rich assortment of techniques and materials by which the aerodynamic handles were made for these knives, the blades were embellished, and the overall knife shapes were achieved. In fact Westerdijk does an excellent job of demonstrating just how accomplished these objects are as works of technical expertise and exquisite artistry. Honestly it is too easy to pass over these details when looking at the knives, partly because their overall shapes are so stunning that handle construction and blade embellishment sometimes get lost in the excitement, and also partly because the unfortunate habit of conceiving these creations as ethnographic objects—one step away from the old curiosity cabinet—can get in the way of people appreciating what exquisite accomplishments they actually are. Westerdijk has spent decades examining and appreciating these works, and it shows in the very nice way he presents them to us. His chapter covers many aspects of creation and use, and is a very worthy read for students of African artistry, collectors, and a more general public interested in learning about the rich history of talented people making things in the world.

Schmidt's chapter on how the collection was assembled is equally welcome. It presents the Dutch trading company's stations and trading agents in a very straightforward, business-like way, providing a barebones sense of their interests and operations. For obvious reasons it does not address the broader, horrendous history that is the West's rape of Africa. These trading stations set along the Lower Congo River in the second half of the 19th century were part of a larger engagement with Africa involving the Dutch, English, French, and the Belgium's King Leopold. We have come to understand these "factories" as exploitative, unethical, and provocatively inhumane, reaching a pinnacle with the butchery and depraved policies of King Leopold. Studies such as Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1999) examine the example of King Leopold with unflinching clarity.

Decades of serious scholarship have now told the story that part of Europe's attitude towards Africa included a passion for acquiring things that seemed exotic and different, with little concern to document details of their meanings, uses, manufacture, and points of origin. So it is not surprising that Schmidt's chapter does not provide specificity on where these knives came from or how they were acquired, nor does the map that is included in the catalog. The knives are attributed to ethnic groups, and this is the effort of long research by many people, from a 1925 effort by Ernest S. Thomas that featured an inspiring two-page chart of knife types and a delightful map to the detailed 1988 Ph.D. thesis of Westerdijk himself, which provides the typology for this catalog.

Thus, *The Cutting Edge* is full of wonderful objects that remind us once again how much we simply cannot know about the history of technology and creativity on the African continent. After reading the Schmidt and especially the Westerdijk essay, and examining the works in the catalog, we see in no uncertain terms what a terrible loss this is, because these knives, along with

so many others, point to a sophisticated technology that should be a bigger part of our historical understanding. Just the fact that African iron working in all of its varied configurations has been so advanced but never really part of an industrial revolution is reason alone for more research attention. The authors of *The Cutting Edge* make that clear in a knowledgeable and readable way.

There are a number of interesting photographs in the text—of the Dutch trading agents, a boat used to ply the trade, trading stations, and throwing knives held by people in battle poses or involved in apparent ceremony. Not all of them are dated, nor have they been integrated with the text or catalog entries. While that is a shame, their inclusion is welcome for the atmosphere they provide the reader. They do give a sense of broader, albeit disconnected, context.

To close, this book is part of an old tradition—museums publishing their holdings so that a broader pool of interested parties could enjoy them or study from them. When I was still in college (I even did a Masters Thesis Paper on throwing knives [McNaughton 1971]) we all wanted to have our own copies of Kurt Krieger's *Westafrikanische Plastik* volumes I, II, and III (1965, 1969a, 1969b), as well as the separate volume dedicated to masks (Krieger and Kutscher 1960). These marvelous volumes presented the holdings of the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde—page after page of photographs and documentation that made you feel as if you could almost be in their storage facilities. Jean Gabus's publications *Au Sahara, I: Les Hommes et Leurs Outils* (1955) and *Au Sahara II: Arts et Symboles* (1958) were also immensely attractive. And of course there were others. These volumes were no substitute for going to museums, but they were like windows into worlds of objects that one might never get to see in real life.

In this expensive day and age it would no doubt be difficult to publish catalogs that feature the significant collections of museums, but *The Cutting Edge* is an excellent example of what is needed and, is, perhaps, possible. Museums are wondrous vaults where spectacular portions of human history reside. They preserve treasures and display what they can. But drawer after drawer, shelf after shelf, in room after room, constitute the storage facilities that harbor artworks and objects more people ought to see. It would be nice if there could be many more books like this, devoted to bringing particular collections to light.

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