Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone.* National Museum of African Art: Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, April 9-August 17, 2014; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota, September 20, 2014-January 18, 2015; Indiana University Arts Museum, Bloomington, Indiana, March-May 2015.

***Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone.* Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers and Alexander Bortolot, eds. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts. 240 pp.**

Reviewed by Ruth M. Stone

The exhibit, *Visions from the Forests*, focuses on masks, brass casted ornaments, steatite figures, and textiles collected by William Siegmann (1943-2011) in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Walking into the entrance of the show as it was installed at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, I was struck by the dramatic shift in light and perspective. In the nearly dark foyer, the speckled light gave the effect of entering a virgin forest area in West Africa where the shadows of leaves danced on the floor. As I moved further into the exhibit, the freestanding cases were points of illumination in a nearly dark room. Light from above highlighted the luminescent, black surface of the Sande helmet masks that dominated the first part of the exhibit. Carved details emerged from the three-dimensional wooden women's heads, complete with detail in the braids. The individual masks in the show are a testament to William Siegmann's expertise in identifying superb examples of these carvings that have been assembled from the various museums that he carefully selected as their permanent homes.

The exhibit stunned with the quality of Sande masks. But it also impressed with the brass ornaments, the steatite figures, a bead necklace, and strip woven "country cloth." These are all parts of the show about which Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, curator of African art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, consulted Bill Siegmann before the end of his life so that in many ways Bill had a hand in shaping the exhibit. Christine Mullen Kramer, a colleague and friend of Siegmann, shaped the exhibit in Washington.

She was but one of a host of friends, family, and colleagues present at the opening who paid tribute to a man who valued and cultivated human relationships. William Siegmann appreciated beautiful objects, but he also valued friends and colleagues and invested in sustaining those connections.

As the former curator of African art at the Brooklyn Museum of Arts, Bill spent extended periods of time in West Africa working not only as a scholar and educator, but also collecting as a passionate connoisseur with a keenly developed sense of aesthetic quality. He set up the art museum at Cuttington College in Gbanga, Liberia, and helped reinstall art at the National

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Figure 1.
Mano culture, Liberia; Mask with shoulder cloth. Wood, animal fur, feathers, cotton, beads.
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of William Siegmann 2011.70.1. Photo courtesy Minneapolis
Institute of Arts.

Figure 2.
Vai culture, Liberia. Ndoli jowei Mask. Wood. The Estate of William Siegmann, Brooklyn.
Photo courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Museum in Monrovia, Liberia. All along the way, he met with art dealers who traveled West Africa from whom he bought the finest works of art he could locate.

The *Visions from the Forests* exhibition opened in Washington on April 9, 2014, and closed there on August 17, 2014. The show then moved to Minneapolis (September 20, 2014, to January 18, 2015) then to Bloomington, Indiana (March 8-May 10, 2015). Each site represents a place of importance to William Siegmann. His family came from Minneapolis, and his personal donations of art have greatly expanded that museum's African art holdings. He received his graduate education in African art and history from Indiana University in Bloomington, and he has given several carefully selected pieces to that art museum as well as a number of pieces to Indiana University's Mathers Museum of World Cultures. Atlanta as a further site fits the larger picture because a segment of William Siegmann's adopted Liberian family—the Boleys from Bolahun, Liberia—have settled in Atlanta.

The accompanying full-color catalog illustrates and describes the objects in the show. It also presents eight essays by scholars that amplify aspects of the exhibit. The first by Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, entitled "Remembering Bill Siegmann," draws together quotes from interviews and essays to help understand Bill Siegmann's motivations as a scholar and art collector. "Forests in the Imagination of the Upper Guinea Coast," by Mariane C. Ferme and Paul Richards explicates scientific characteristics and local beliefs about forests and the relationship of people from Liberia and Sierra Leone to that very important feature of the landscape. "Extending the Stage: Photography and Sande Initiates in the Early Twentieth Century," by Nanina Guyer analyzes some early photographs that document Sande practices in West Africa. Frederick Lamp's essay, "By Their Fruits You Will Know Them: Sande Mask Carvers Identified," addresses the classification of style of the various masks in the region and some of the individual carvers that have been identified. Daniel Reed discusses masking from a decidedly ethnographic perspective and details indigenous concepts framing masks in performance settings. Barbara Johnson, who worked with Bill Siegmann in the field, provides some background on brass casting in Liberia. Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers discusses the region's rather mysterious stone sculptures that have long fascinated art historians. Finally, Christine Mullen Kreamer addresses Bill Siegmann's focus on connoisseurship, drawing on extended personal acquaintance with him.

Each of these essays expands our understanding of the exhibit. While there are times when the connections between the essays might have been more closely made, they each in their own way give us insight as they spring from fairly disparate perspectives that drive the work: art history analysis, ethnographic research, and personal reminiscence.

The catalog of objects presents high-resolution color photographs with extensive descriptions, a bibliography, and an index. The graphic layout is high in quality and aesthetically impressive. And the "country cloth" on the inside cover is masterful.

Visions from the Forests as multi-sited exhibit and accompanying catalog is a major contribution to our understanding of the arts and artistic practices in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The dedicated work of Bill Siegmann and the curators and scholars is impressive.

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