

***Sacred Art: Catholic Saints and Candomblé Gods in Modern Brazil.* Henry Glassie and Pravina Shukla. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 450 pp.\***

Reviewed by Ray Cashman

One night in a café in Salvador da Bahia, Henry Glassie and Pravina Shukla were listening to Zéu Lobo sing hymns of praise to Brazil. Being visually oriented and surrounded by a wealth of handmade beauty, Glassie and Shukla struck upon an idea: to seek out and document the artists who create the paintings and sculptures that, like Lobo's songs, encapsulate a Brazilian idea of Brazil.

Note, however, that Brazil is slightly larger than China, nearly as big as the United States, almost twice the size of the European Union. It takes up half the landmass of South America. For ethnographic fieldwork to be feasible—for real individuals with real names, creations, and perspectives not be obscured—cuts had to be made, and their first cut was geographical. They chose to stick to the Northeast where Native, European, and African cultures first blended to become something recognizably Brazilian. The Northeast—particularly the states of Bahia and Pernambuco—is the source of many religious, musical, and artistic traditions that have spread across the country and become shared markers of national identity.

A second cut was conceptual. Glassie and Shukla were not interested in narrowing by media or genre, or in studying only artwork that is realistic or only artwork that is abstract, for example. Instead, following the likes of Wassily Kandinsky—and well versed in Dell Hymes's notions of competence and performance—Glassie and Shukla proceeded with a definition of art as the product of sincerity, passion, and skill. And as any good fieldworker would, they followed the lead of the artists they met who consistently made a distinction between two categories of art: the sacred and the quotidian. Although their original goal was to publish a book accounting for both, that is simply too much data. So this book focuses on the sacred in its European- and African-derived, Catholic and Candomblé varieties, and more often than not, both at the same time in varying proportions.

The book begins in Pelourinho, the historical heart of Salvador. Here with Glassie and Shukla as guides, we walk alongside the faithful in processions and explore first the churches and cathedrals—and later the markets, shops, galleries, and museums—that are home to the sacred art that leads us to their makers. With the scene set and the range of stylistic options anticipated, Glassie and Shukla's study of sacred art and its creators begins in earnest with another husband and wife team, Edival and Izaura Rosas—modern masters of the hand-carved and painted wooden saints statue.

Edival carves and Izaura paints, and together they produce polychromed sacred statuary from the small and domestic variety to life-size and monumental commissions that are found in homes, collections, and churches around the world. Based on European models and demonstrating a

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commitment to continuity, Edival and Izaura's work advances a long tradition through flourishes of individual genius and inspiration from deep within. Anatomical accuracy is tempered by stylized idealism to capture otherworldly beauty signaled by "smooth, luminous, brightly colored surfaces" that erase evidence of natural materials opening us to the supernatural (57).

Of course, there is more than one vision of the sacred and more than one way to evoke it. To shift quickly from details and chronology to the overall structure and argument of the book, note that after lingering with Edival and Izaura in the beginning, the end of the book complements—bookends—the early, largely European influenced examples with the paintings and metal work of African descended devotees of Candomblé.

The paintings and banners of Francisco Santos, for example, depict the initiated in motion, dancing and offering their bodies as vessels for the divine *oríxas* when they descend. In another mode Francisco depicts the *oríxas* themselves, emphasizing African traits and above all emphasizing their physical beauty to evoke their divine power. In another medium, Jorge Pacheco, Samuel Rogrigues, and Jose Adário dos Santos forge wild, visionary metal work—stylized representational *bonecos* and abstracted *ferramentas*—works that not only depict the *oríxas*—Oxála, Oxum, Ogum, Exú—they also serve as seats for their energy, power, vitality, and *axé*.

Many differences seem to separate these examples from the work of Edival and Izaura, and yet there is so much that connects them. Most of the book, in between beginning and end, establishes and traces the clear continuum between the European and the African, the Catholic and Candomblé, in both style and content.

From Edival and Izaura in Pelourinho, we follow Glassie and Shukla into the shops and ateliers of Ibimirim's *santeiros*, who are carving wooden saints in both neoclassical and baroque styles. We then shift to the artists of Maragojipinha who work in native clay to recapitulate the popular repertoire of saints in a similar range of styles. From there we make our way to those in Tracunhaém who also shape saints in clay, sometimes on a larger scale, and we begin to meet artists who lean toward an African-derived visionary, syndetic style.

At this pivot point, the book shifts focus to painters in Olinda, particularly Flávio Nogueira da Silva whose devotional work depicts both Catholic saints and Candomblé *oríxas* with no sense of divided loyalty. Tipping further to the African influenced side of the continuum, the wood carvings of artists in Cachoiera accommodate their source materials, retaining a connection to nature in their invocations of sacred essences. Here artists such as Mário Filho do Louco boldly and self-consciously emphasize the Afro in Afro-Brazilian.

At the same time, we may appreciate how the cross-influence of European and African styles reinforce shared attributes such as iconically frontal forms that, quoting the authors, "positions the image before a person at prayer and lifts the figure out of time, away from the human and toward the divine" (299). Meditating on the "miscegenistic glory of the New World," the authors continue: "However horrible the history, the massacres and slavery, racism and greed, however miserable

the political and economic conditions, there is also the fused flourishing in art and literature and music that could only have happened here, here in the Americas where native, European, and African cultures came fitfully, fruitfully together” (299).

At the end of this massive survey we find that some of Brazil’s sacred art may be more invested in surficial appearances, reproducing the look of nature, while other art “probes through nature to discover and express vital inner qualities” (455). But regardless of where an artist or artwork falls on the continuum, the authors note that “all the artists in this book, working in a Brazilian tradition that is both African and European—all of the artists, when crafting sacred images, shape them to express and unite these essences: power and beauty” (455).

Altogether, this book brims with virtues. Interviews with dozens of artists offer us a wealth of information including life histories and insider perspectives on a range of topics: meditations about the processes through which art is learned, mastery gained, inspiration channeled; observations about the customers and the markets these artists serve; and particularly meditations about the nature of art, tradition, creativity, and the sacred. Clear throughout is the fact that despite differences in subject, medium, and aesthetic choices, all of the artists in this book share certain values and priorities. Taken together, they agree that while money is necessary it is not the most important goal. What is essential? Living “close to the spirit, helping others, doing work that is fulfilling” (455)—work that you want to do, on your own terms, on your own time, and without a boss.

Cuts had to be made, but the choice to pursue *sacred* art has a number of benefits. Lived religion is an inherently experiential and aesthetic phenomenon, meaning that verbal texts alone are never enough for interpretation. Material culture, in particular, is essential for appreciating religion as it is lived by the vast majority, especially in a place such as Brazil where sacred objects are ubiquitous. To sum up a century of Brazilian ethnography in five words: Brazilians love icons and processions. And as Glassie and Shukla contend, “by not concentrating on written texts as though we were the literary critics of scripture, by not concentrating on only one of Brazil’s religious traditions as most writers do, and by featuring sacred art and the words of the artists themselves, we offer a corrective to the study of religion” (5). Along the way we come to appreciate that there is robust continuum of traditional sacred art in Brazil today, pursued by a great many artists and enjoyed by wide popular market. The end result of Glassie and Shukla’s quest, begun roughly a decade ago, is a beautiful, powerful book. It is also a clear reminder that there is no substitute for fieldwork.

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*Indiana University Press, 2008) was recognized with the Chicago Folklore Prize and the Donald Murphy Prize.*

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