African Art from the Menil Collection
A new catalogue of works mapping African cultural histories

Bamana masks and headdresses, Lega ivories and Dogon sculpture, terra-cotta figures from Mala, Benin bronzes: the Menil Foundation has recently published a major scholarly catalogue, *African Art from the Menil Collection*, featuring 115 of the museum’s finest pieces from across the continent. Distributed by Yale University Press, the 254-page book, with 150 color and 29 black-and-white illustrations, is the first comprehensive catalogue of John and Dominique de Menil’s collection of African art. Insightful essays explore the ways in which the couple’s interests in modernism and human rights led to the formation of this remarkable part of their art collection.

Dating primarily from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the selection is as varied and rich as the cultures the art represents. Organized by region, the objects in the catalogue come from North Africa and the Sahel, Coastal West Africa, and Central and East Africa. Colorful trophy heads from nineteenth-century Cameroon (made of wood, cloth, glass beads, and brass buttons) represent the skulls of enemies defeated in battle and were believed to possess supernatural forces. A female figure carved in ivory, from the twentieth-century Democratic Republic of Congo, is seen as a symbol of creativity and protection, as well as a reminder of the importance of women to the community. Ritual and domestic items, such as combs, knives, cups, and flutes, are also included.

The new publication, which follows the recent reinstallation of the Menil’s African galleries by Kristina Van Dyke, associate curator for collections and research, features text by Van Dyke and other leading scholars of African art that discusses the individual objects and places the Menil’s holdings of African art within the context of the museum’s permanent collection. As Van Dyke writes in her introductory essay, “The de Menils’ humanistic and spiritual inclinations provided a foundation for their wide-ranging collection … they were interested in how art from different times and places spoke to a long-standing struggle for human meaning.”

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