recent exhibitions

CONTEMPORARY ART OF SENEGAL
Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario
August 15-September 23, 1979

Contemporary African art has finally made its official debut in Canada. Last summer the Art Gallery of Hamilton hosted "Contemporary Art of Senegal" to the delight of Canadian audiences and local devotees of African art. This was, to my knowledge, the first exhibition of modern art from Africa presented by a major public museum in Canada, and it opened to rave reviews from art critics in the major Toronto and Hamilton newspapers.

"Contemporary Art of Senegal" was a spectacular exhibition, displayed to great effect in Hamilton's spacious gallery. Some of the pieces were, by virtue of their sheer size, impressive to the point of being overpowering. Loub Diouf's tapestry "Childhood Kingdom" (750 x 400 cm.) and M'Baye Diep's polyptych on wood, "Imagery Spirits" (seven panels, each 150 x 30 cm.), were definitely in the monumental category, perhaps selected (and created?) as much to impress as to please or provoke. Viewers were practically swamped by the 170 pieces representing some 60 artists. But if anyone in Canada needed to be convinced of the quality of modern African art, this show surely removed all doubts.

Readers of African Arts may be familiar with an earlier version of this show via Bernard Patau's article entitled "Senegalese Art Today" (VIII, 1, 1974). In fact, I had expected to see substantially the same exhibition that Patau reviewed at the Grand Palais in Paris and which subsequently toured Europe. While some of the same chefs d'oeuvre were there, many new works had been added to update the show.

How has Senegalese art developed since 1974? The Hamilton exhibition offered few clues. Some visitors felt that we were being offered more of the same: good work, but no new developments. Certain of the younger artists are now being shown. Two tapestries by Samba Balde created a unique, painterly effect using intriguing abstractions from the familiar ti-tree theme. Also included was a selection of Senegalese glass painting, a popular folk art form not shown in Paris. Their spontaneity and lack of pretense made them charming, especially when contrasted with the studied professionalism and painterliness of the other works. Themes from daily life and religion (particularly the Mouride cosmology), while undoubtedly reproduced with slight variation on numerous occasions, hint at a vigorous popular art and cultural life far removed from the art school-museum-cultural center complex.

Strangely enough for an African exhibition, "Contemporary Art of Senegal" was weakest in the area of sculpture. Patau noted this five years ago, yet little progress can be discerned from what was presented in Hamilton. Cheikh Diep's heavy cast bronzes still strike one as pale imitations of nineteenth-century European formalism, even though the sub-

mation about that country: a map, a brief description, and historical photographs of people and places. In short, an exhibition of this nature should not be presented in a vacuum. Who are the artists? What do they look like? What do the city of Dakar and the Thies workshops look like? Who were Ilayamu Bamba and Lat Diop? Visitors must not be left to fend for themselves, as they were in Hamilton.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton produced a striking poster from an oil painting by Bocar Diop and a handsome, if inadequate, catalogue. One wishes that the ministers of state could be barred from writing introductions to such catalogues. In this case, what should have been an informative essay on Senegalese art turned into a pompous and verbose piece of self-congratulatory obfuscation. Future catalogues could be improved immensely, and with relatively little effort, by giving us: an informative essay; translations of Wolof words and titles; a brief explanation of techniques (Hamilton's section on glass painting was quite helpful); a listing of exhibitions where the artists' work has been shown in addition to the "official" exhibitions; and a decent bibliography.

None of these criticisms should detract from the basic importance of this show. The Senegalese government, from whose collection the exhibition was drawn, is years ahead of any other African country in promoting its contemporary arts. The Art Gallery of Hamilton and its director, Mr. Glen Cumming, have defied the "tradition-is-best" snobbery of most public and private galleries here in Canada by bringing us what is simply the best display of contemporary African art yet assembled in the country.

The poster and the 48-page catalogue, with 23 color and 18 black-and-white illustrations, are available from: Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; or The Best of Africa, 165 Carlton Street, Toronto, Ontario M5A 2K3, Canada. U.S. $8.00 each, postpaid.

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