Compte rendu de *The Making of Asmat Art: Indigenous Art in a World Perspective* de Nick Stanley

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STANLEY Nick, 2012. *The Making of Asmat Art: Indigenous Art in a World Perspective*, Canon Pyon, Sean Kingston Publishing, XIV + 249 p., bibliogr, index, ill.

The Making of Asmat Art, by Nick Stanley, is not for readers looking for a description of the process of Asmat carving. Neither is it an exegesis of the iconography of Asmat imagery or the meaning of objects within ritual contexts. Rather, the book is a consideration of the evolution of Asmat carving and its perception by the West. It is a meticulously researched volume that pulls from a variety of fields: historiography, history, anthropology, ethnography, and art history.

“Such a tale requires an excursion into a number of different academic subjects and ways of seeing, but it also refuses to privilege any disciplinary focus. The intention of this volume is to explore such a hybrid approach with the Asmat case, and to seek to extrapolate some observations that may be applicable in other cross-cultural environments.” (p. 5)

This wider view leaves the book open to a justifiable criticism concerning a lack of a clear methodology or how the work fits in the larger corpus of research on the Asmat and their art. However, by not limiting himself to a single approach, Stanley is able to introduce questions that go beyond a consideration of the Asmat to those that have relevance to any study of culture by Western academics. These include ideas of isolation and identity, the effects of global events on the local, the perceptions of indigenous art by Western audiences and the people who produce these objects, and the politics of conversion and cultural evolution. Of particular note are the interplay of international art markets with the local, as well as the collection and exhibition of art and who controls the process and results.

The book begins with some preliminary notes on orthography and acronyms. This material is followed by a short Prologue of Stanley’s personal experiences in Asmat, particularly with the carver Omomá. The Introduction is entitled “Absent presences.” Here the limitations of earlier chroniclers of the Asmat, particularly when compared to the north coast of West Papua, are noted. Stanley recounts and comments on proposals as to why the Asmat remained as isolated as they did until the mid-20th century. Most of these suggestions focus on the environment, as the Asmat region is primarily alluvial swamp with a northern border of steep, high mountains, all resulting in a lack of fixed topographical features. Also at play was the fierce reputation of the Asmat based on the few early contacts. Therefore, the Asmat did not suffer the depredations of Blackbirders or have any interaction with 19th century collectors of Bird-of-Par-

adise feathers. Stanley also speculates that a major factor was the reluctance of the Asmat to engage in exchange with the outside after having observed the decline of neighboring cultures after White contact and the failure of modernization to bring prosperity. Thus, in essence, the Asmat had breathing space to adjust, remaining essentially isolated until after World War II. Yet, then why, in the face of the dearth of explorers’ reports and anthropological discourse, is the presence of Asmat art in Western collections so substantial, especially considering the relatively small size of the population? This question is a major thread that flows throughout the rest of the text and unites Stanley’s hybridic approach as he takes the reader through a chronological journey.

Chapter One is entitled “The historical appearance of the Asmat.” Almost immediately, Stanley counters the trope of the absolute isolation of the Asmat, but without arguing for more than superficial contact. His first section in this chapter introduces ideas by anthropologists that provide social and cultural theories that may explain the Asmat choice to remain inaccessible. Beginning with the landfall of James Cook in 1770, Stanley investigates the military and scientific expeditions into Asmat territory of the early 20th century. However, much of the information is scant, reflecting the actual surviving records. In contrast, he pays particular attention to the three visits that Walter Edward Guinness (First Baron Moyne) made in 1929, 1935, and 1936. Lord Moyne and the photographers he brought on his journeys have left an archive of still shots and movies. Once again, recurring themes that occur throughout the book are brought to the fore. The differing expectations and agendas of those engaged in cultural interchange mediated by trade, the politics and economics of museum collections, and the changing focus and methodologies in anthropological studies are among these.

Chapter Two is listed in the contents as “Asmat engagement with the Dutch colonial world, 1949-62.” However, the title at the beginning of the chapter states “1938-62.” It is at the earlier date that Stanley takes up the history. However, the greater focus of the chapter is the time after World War II with the coming of Catholic priests to Asmat, beginning with Gerard Zegwaard of the Dutch congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Zegwaard was a major factor in the early amassing of Asmat art in museums in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and New York. Former colonial civil servants also participated in what was to become the creation of an outside taste for Asmat art. The art trade expanded under Zegwaard and his successors and they embraced “the new in terms of manufacture and style as their marketing developed (p. 51.)” The tension between what is “new” and what is “traditional” is a major consideration for the remainder of Stanley’s book.

Chapter Three, “Museum scholars and collectors,” focuses on the next round of gathering, this time by professional anthropologists and museologists. These include Simon Kooijman and Adriaan Gerbrands,

both from the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. While Kooijman's focus was on collecting for museum displays, Gerbrands often commissioned carvings and methodically documented the process during his eight months of intensive fieldwork. However, he was skeptical concerning anything not, in his estimation, "traditional." Kooijman's work influenced Robert Goldwater of the then Museum of Primitive Art in New York. Goldwater, in turn, urged the politician, collector, and philanthropist Nelson Rockefeller to acquire Asmat art. Nelson's son, Michael, subsequently travelled with Gerbrands to Asmat, acquiring the exquisite *bisj* poles that are now the centerpiece of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Oceanic collection. Michael died in Asmat in September 1961. In the next year, outside geo-political events would directly influence the Asmat; 1962 was a critical time as the newly emerged Indonesia focused on the country as a singularity rather than a collection of disparate cultures. As Stanley notes, in this process "The old way of life had to be extirpated... (p. 70)" and West Papua had to be "pacified."

In Chapter Four, "Anthropological missionaries and the Indonesian state," Stanley describes the impact of Indonesian policies and the military on Asmat art and culture. At the same time, the Crosier Brothers from the United States gradually replaced the priests of the Sacred Heart mission. These were a new breed of proselytizer. In the second set of Crosiers sent to Asmat was Father Alfonse Sowada (later Bishop), who had a master's degree in anthropology. In investigating what he terms "anthropological missionization," Stanley reflects on the impact of the Second Vatican Council called by Pope John XXIII in 1962, as well as the differing views and agendas conventionally held by anthropologists and missionaries. He also considers the complexities of the conflict and competition between the state of Indonesia and the missionaries in regard to Asmat cultural practice and belief.

Chapter 5, "Making carving work," is subtitled "Development programs in the 1970s." Here Stanley documents the funding of the Asmat Handicraft Project by the United Nations' Fund for the Development of West Irian (FUNDWI). Initially Jae Hoogerbrugge, a former member of the Dutch military who was highly knowledgeable concerning the Asmat, headed the scheme. He was also experienced with the logistics of international shipping and, particularly, the intricacies of that process in Indonesia. In terms of Asmat carving, "Hoogerbrugge trod a fine line between the new and the old (p. 98)," always with an eye for quality over all else. One of the effects of the Asmat Handicraft Project was that carvings were no longer created by specialists with sacred knowledge or linked to rituals and feasting. Rather, more and more work was by amateurs in the service of museum collections and sales to other outsiders. In addition, work was selected by non-Asmat, particularly the project head, with their own ideas of what was appropriate or "authentic." The project

funding was terminated in 1974, leaving a vacuum that was filled by the creation of a museum in Asmat.

In Chapter 6, Stanley switches from a consideration of global forces in the development of Asmat carving to a consideration of the local. The chapter is titled "The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress (The revitalization of tradition.)" Under consideration is the creation and management of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in the regional capital of Agats. The museum was the idea of Bishop Sowada, who wanted to preserve Asmat art and culture as a source of pride and identity for the people and as a foundation of knowledge for future generations. He had help in this endeavor from Gunter and Ursula Konrad, the Rockefeller Foundation, Tobias Schneebaum, and Malcolm Walker of the Centre for Anthropology at Cenderwasih University. The first director of the museum, Bram Kuruwaip, was from Muyu, located north of Asmat. He held a BA in theology and philosophy and trained in curatorship at the East-West Center at the University of Hawai'i. The next director, Jufen Biakai, had a similar educational background, but had conducted fieldwork and hailed from Asmat. In his discussion, Stanley clearly lays out the complications of a local endeavor influenced by Western visions of museum practice and diverging ideas of this museum's purpose. In addition, there are the conflicts resulting from the contrasting audiences that are being served and the wide differences in both expectations and interests.

Chapter 7, "Consolidating new art forms" brings us back to the larger world, but through the impact of local developments. The *Limba Ukir* is an annual carving competition and sale that evolved out of the collection practices of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress. The intention was to provide a steady income to Asmat artists by auctioning off the winning pieces, while at the same time feeding the international market with new Asmat art. As in the 1950s and 60s, where the concern was the collection of the best examples of "authentic" works, the issue of quality and meeting the standards of museums and curators became an issue in the context of the competition. The tension between repeating old "traditional" forms and innovation was always present. In addition, "The judging of the carving competition has been done largely by non-Asmat assessors in terms of an international audience (p. 154)." Stanley takes us through the involvement of the Indonesian government via the Asmat Progress and Development Program, which had its own agenda of how to sustain Asmat carving and present it to the outside world. At the same time, Asmat artists were afforded the opportunity to visit Europe and the United States. Ultimately, the local arm of government expanded the art competition into a Festival of Asmat Art and Culture. Although the 2018 festival went off as planned, the covid pandemic has resulted in the cancellation of the 2020 events. This chapter ends with questions concerning the role of new art forms vis-à-vis Asmat art, the idea that Asmat carving may

lose its power once removed from ritual contexts, and the importance of women's creative forms. Stanley concludes with the statement that these questions will be answered in the final chapter, by which he means the Conclusion.

Chapter 8 is called "Visual adventures." While most of the previous sections have focused on the influences on Asmat carving, here Stanley discusses the impact of Asmat art on global creative expression. Specific examples are noted in regards to documentary film and still photography that still fall within the category of documentation. In contrast are what Stanley calls "artistic surveyors" who break from the documentarians via a "self-reflexiveness in their actions that breaks the iron laws of primordialism (p. 179)." Among these are filmmakers Paul Carter and Roy Villevoys, drawer Pet Bognor, photographer Wim van Oijen, and painters Fons Bloemen and Ingo Wegerl. Stanley does not provide much context concerning the various studies of cultural appropriation. However, as his focus is specifically on the Asmat, this absence does not significantly weaken his arguments.

Stanley's Conclusion, titled "Dazzling the anthropologists" discusses why anthropologists, missionaries, and the world at large have been so taken with Asmat carving. Here he delves into what is closer to philosophy than the history centered previous chapters. Is it the aesthetics, the strength of design, the intriguing iconography that hold the viewer captive? However, at the end he returns to the issue of who is the evaluator and what is being evaluated. Who is influencing whom? Yet, the questions asked in Chapter 7 are never really answered and maybe cannot be. For perhaps the greatest problem in the book is not one of Stanley's making, but a result of the existing corpus of work on the Asmat. That is the absence of the thoughts and perceptions of the people themselves. This is not a problem of which Stanley is unaware. He notes this concern from scholars, missionaries, and others throughout the book. That is "What is it the Asmat think?"

Other problems in the book are not the result of philosophical problems or a lack of sources. One difficulty is the large number of typographic and grammatical errors in the text. For example, we have the unfortunate situation on page 90 where Gerbrands "bought" his colleague Philip Dark, rather than brought him to visit the Asmat. Another example is the difference in the titles presented for Chapter 2. The layout is inconsistent as well, with numerous places where the first word of the next sentence immediately follows a period, with no space between.

Despite its gaps, and even the typos, *The Making of Asmat Art*, is an important addition to the study of the Asmat and to the consideration of global forces at work in the acceptance and dissemination of indigenous art. In his exposition on the Asmat, Stanley has demonstrated the connectedness of the world

today. By looking closely at the history of a once isolated people, he challenges the reader to think about art, culture, and history in a holistic way. The process can be messy and may not result in definitive answers, but the questions he raises are important and deserving of consideration.

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GALLIOT Sébastien, 2019. *Le tatouage samoan. Un rite polynésien dans l'histoire*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 447 p., bibliogr. ill., annexes.

S'il est un lieu, dans le Pacifique, où la pratique du tatouage s'est perpétuée sans rupture de continuité, c'est bien l'archipel des Samoa occidentales, auquel Sébastien Galliot consacre la plus grande part de sa thèse de doctorat¹. Il restitue son travail monographique dans un livre dont le sous-titre montre toute l'ambition : un rite polynésien dans l'histoire.

L'étude est donc historique, non qu'elle retrace l'histoire du tatouage à Samoa, mais parce qu'elle considère l'actualité des pratiques dans la complexité de leur développement, de leurs significations, de leurs réalisations. Ainsi, le livre commence-t-il assez classiquement par les traditions orales anciennes associées au tatouage, l'histoire des contacts et de l'installation des missions (les trois premiers chapitres), pour s'attacher à la spécificité des usages samoans. L'analyse commence par la discussion des théories qu'Alfred Gell défend dans *Wrapping in images* (chap. 4) pour s'étendre aux praticiens, aux pratiques, aux objets, aux images (chapitres 5 à 8), avant une « Discussion sur les savoirs rituels et leur transmission » (chap. 9) que vient clore une conclusion générale (439 pages en tout, illustrations et bibliographie comprises).

Précisons tout de suite que, dans sa pratique « traditionnelle », le tatouage samoan est une institution rituelle, et au premier chef, une initiation sous la forme d'une « souffrance », une « douleur » partagée entre paires de co-initiés – qui sont en relation soa – et avec les autres accompagnants, chargés de la « prière » *tāpu'a'i* qui assure la réussite d'une opération hautement dangereuse. De là, le tatouage tire toute son importance et sa signification pour les Samoans. Bien qu'ils se soient considérablement simplifiés au fil du temps, on constate que

« les aspects techniques, esthétiques et économiques de l'activité de l'expert technico-rituel se situent dans un rapport d'interdépendance entre les communautés locales (urbaines et rurales), les diasporas polynésiennes, la "clientèle" occidentale et certains tatoueurs professionnels occidentaux » (p. 9)

1. Pour la thèse, et le présent livre qui en découle, le terrain fut réalisé dans les Samoa occidentales et dans la diaspora samoanne de Nouvelle-Zélande.