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Asen, Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art

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New Book

Asen, Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art

By Edna Bay.

University of Illinois Press, Hardcover, 208pp., ISBN-13: 978-0252032554, February, 2008.

Description from the Publisher:

Asen, metal sculptures of southern Benin, West Africa, are created to honor the dead and are meant to encourage interaction between visible and spiritual worlds in ancestral rites associated with the belief system known as vodun. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the former Kingdom of Dahomey, Bay traces more than 150 years of transformations in the manufacture and symbolic meanings of asen against the backdrop of a slave-raiding monarchy, domination by French colonialism, and postcolonial political and social change.

Bay expertly reads evidence of the area's turbulent history through analysis of asen motifs as she describes the diverse influences affecting the process of asen production from the point of their probable invention to their current decline in use. Paradoxically, asen represent a sacred African art form, yet are created using European materials and technologies and are embellished with figures drawn from tourist production. Bay's meticulously researched artistic and historical study is a fascinating exploration of creativity and change within Benin's culture.

