Reading Objects

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The first book presents 130 masterpieces of the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The pieces were presented in an exhibition likewise entitled ‘Being Object Being Art’ which lasted from 31 October 2009 to 31 October 2010. The objects come from a large part of the world ranging from the Americas, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and East Asia. The objects are beautifully photographed, some with extra photographs with details, and described and they show the astonishing variety of forms and objects people are capable of devising in the non-Western world. The photographic section is preceded by a short essay by Eva Ch. Raabe, Mona B. Suhrbier, Christine Stelzig, and Achim Sibeth. It describes the new tendencies of Ethnographic museums to consider the artefacts in their collections as more than ethnographic tools but also as expressions of art, albeit not as art in the purest sense as in the case of art exhibited in art museums, which has no other purpose than being art in itself. In short, the exhibitions of these objects endeavour to present them out-of-context as objects in themselves too. This being so, there should always be some sort of accord between objects and audience if communication is to take place. Art museums try to facilitate this communication by organizing exhibitions and publishing catalogues, explaining art, and discussing the pieces quite like ethnographic museums do with their objects, although with different content. In the latter case, the artistic and aesthetic qualities have to be explained, something that is unnecessary for objects in art museums where the artistic...
and aesthetic are taken for granted. Thus, the book presents ‘masterpieces’ taken from particularly unique “ethnographica” to present the ‘exceptional, the elaborate, the other, the perfect or perhaps imperfect, the harmonious or the disturbing objects among them’ (p. 11).

The chapter on Southeast Asia was written by Achim Sibeth. It is unfortunately only two pages long but provides interesting information about the history of the collection in the museum. The Southeast Asia part of the book centres on Indonesia as the museum’s collection on this part of the region vastly outnumbers that of any other area. Many objects were donated to the museum by the people who acquired them through their explorations in Indonesia during the first part of the twentieth century. The pieces portrayed in the book are considered outstanding for quality and aesthetic reasons, whatever they are. The objects displayed here originate from India, Sumatra (Batak, Nias, Palembang, Lampung), Borneo (Iban, Kayan), Java, Bali, Buton, Flores, Solor, Adonara, Lembata, Alor, Timor, Leti, Tanimbar, and North Luzon in the Philippines. The photographs are all of outstanding quality and portray the objects in the clearest way possible.

The introductory chapter quite rightfully asks the question whether it is appropriate to use terms like ‘art’ for the objects displayed in the book and especially whether using the word ‘masterpiece’ is the appropriate term to talk about them. In the West, art often exists in a different context than everyday objects, no matter how nicely made or decorated. For Westerners or for people from indigenous cultures, art means something different, if the term may be known in these cultures at all. I think the discussion is academic because for me it does not matter. However, for modern exhibition and museum policies, the idea is important because it appears that more money and prestige are attached to art rather than to ethnographic paraphernalia, which are often now seen as interesting, but not necessarily in the positive sense of the word. The discussion is of course also about the different ways people from different cultural backgrounds view things from their own and other cultures and whether statements made in the West about art and ethnographic objects from other places in the world are valid.

That people may look at the same objects in totally different ways is clear. The notion of validity is also academic. Valid in whose eyes? Let me illustrate this following Siegel’s anecdotal approach with some experiences I had at Leiden University some 15 years ago and in Jakarta even longer ago. One of our Islamic students in Leiden went to Indonesia for a holiday and to visit his family and I asked him to bring me a batik cloth from his place of origin, Ponorogo in Central Java. He did. He came back with a nice batik, which I hung on the wall in my office. He was astonished. Why on earth would I want to hang a piece of