

Art that makes you think

by Ryan Piurek

The village of Dogoduman (a.k.a. “Sweet Little City”), in Mali, West Africa, June 1978. At a performance organized by the town elders and youth association, the masquerader—hidden within an enormous bird costume—enters the dance area. Inside the huge bird, wearing baggy shorts and various amulets around his neck, is the virtuoso masquerade dancer Sidi Ballo, who has readied himself for this moment the way a boxer would prepare for a championship fight, a swimmer for an Olympic meet, or a singer for her Metropolitan Opera debut.

The drumming and singing heralding the performance pick up in speed and intensity, and there is a palpable sense of tension and excitement in the hot evening air. Finally, “the bird,” or “Kòndò” as it is known, rushes out “in an awesome gust of movement,” according to Patrick McNaughton, who, by “pure luck,” has been invited to the performance. McNaughton is completely taken aback by the bird dance, astounded by the stamina of the masquerader, the precision of his movement, his

amazing control as he shakes and jerks his costume, sometimes pitching it so hard to the side that it seems like it will fall over. But of course it never does—that’s all part of the act.

A few hours later, though, the bird actually does fall over on its side. A hush comes over the crowd. It is no secret that masquerade dance is fraught with hazards—the costume’s tightly wound wooden scaffolding may break and spring apart, puncturing the unlucky dancer inside. Instead, something truly spectacular happens. First, the bird’s head goes up “like a periscope,” according to McNaughton. Then, from inside the costume in a squatting position, the masquerader turns the costume upside down, so that it is now bottom up. The bird’s head remains properly oriented, even though the costume is now inverted. It’s at this moment that McNaughton realizes, to his “absolute astonishment,” that the masquerader is actually dancing inside the inverted masquerade.



[OPPOSITE PAGE] Montol peoples, Nigeria, Female Figure, ca. 1950, Indiana University Art Museum, Raymond and Laura Wielgus Collection

[RIGHT] Masquerade dancer Sidi Ballo performing in 1978

[FAR RIGHT] Sidi Ballo dancing in his upside down bird masquerade, 1978



Photos courtesy of Patrick McNaughton



Photo by Mike Cavanaugh and Kevin Montague, IU Art Museum

Years later, McNaughton, who is Chancellor's Professor of African Art History in the Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts, still marvels at the almost magical feat. "No part of the dancer's body is directly touching ground. There is the cloth of the masquerade between his feet and the earth. And yet he is dancing," McNaughton writes. "In fact, he is moving about quite beautifully, as if to suggest the happy intervention of powers beyond the ordinary. I am in awe."

AN AESTHETIC MILIEU

The awe-inspiring dance at Dogoduman is the subject of McNaughton's recently published book, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City* (IU Press, 2008). The dance forever transformed the way McNaughton thinks about the nature of art, beauty, and aesthetics, and their relationship with society. Presently chairperson of Department of the History of Art in IUB's College of Arts and Sciences, McNaughton says he arrived at his own perspective on these subjects only after years of thinking about Sidi Ballo and his performance.

The performance, McNaughton says repeatedly, was "galvanizing." In his book's introduction, McNaughton writes that the performance caused him to "grapple with the social, spiritual, and aesthetic power that good art carries into people, and with the qualities and capabilities of individuals that make them distinctive in life and art, no matter how intertwined they are with the social world that fuels them. It made me think about how the differences between people contribute to the construction of meaning and value, and how the strategic use of aesthetics affects people in ways that can be profound."

After years of reflection, McNaughton is convinced that aesthetics—or, more specifically, Sidi Ballo's focused attention on aesthetics as part of his "performance persona"—made the dance the spectacular and deeply moving event that it was.

Ballo's "aesthetic milieu," McNaughton says, came as no accident. From the way he walked ("with a lilt to his step and an almost poetic way that he held his body") and talked ("his intonations and phrases") to the way he laughed to the way he moved inside the masquerade costume, Ballo was gracefulness and elegance personified. Those qualities, though, masked a remarkable intensity that drove him to conduct such incredible, often dangerous, dance maneuvers, while overcoming such performance-affecting factors as heat, exhaustion, and age. (Ballo had already been dancing for 17 years before the performance at Dogoduman.)

When McNaughton returned to visit Ballo in 1998, 20 years after seeing him perform for the first time, the dancer was still "fit as a fiddle," despite "smoking like a fiend." He still danced, though not as frequently (now he performs just once a year) and with a heavier, wider-at-the-base costume designed to keep him from tripping. If Ballo had lost a step, it wasn't clearly evident.

"In 1998, he was 58 years old, exactly the same age as me, and he walked down the street as if there were no such thing as

gravity," McNaughton says. "And he said to me, 'Patrice, I can't dance anymore. I'm too old. I'm too old. I should be farming instead. Farming is much easier.' Here he was talking about farming, where you're bent over eight hours a day! But then he put on a performance for me and a friend and, oh man, could he still dance!"

BLACKSMITHS' POWER, AESTHETICS REASSESSED

Art historians have not always appreciated—or even realized—the aesthetic sophistication of African art, music, and dance such as that performed by Sidi Ballo, McNaughton explains. During the 1950s, when African art history first started as a serious discipline, and through the next two decades, most art historians described the continent's art as functional or utilitarian and felt little need to examine it in terms of beauty, form, and sophistication.

In the early days of African art history, there were notable exceptions, individuals who urged their peers to reconsider the nature of aesthetics in African art as well as in society. Among them was McNaughton's advisor at Yale University, Robert Farris Thompson, who is one of the nation's leading scholars of African art and has devoted much of his life to the serious study of art in the Afro-Atlantic world. Thompson "believed in the value of aesthetics right from the start," McNaughton says. "He had this very clear vision of how African art was intellectual and so very provocative in terms of the ideas it challenges you with, from being delicate and gentle to in-your-face. He was a pioneer."

Although primed to take aesthetics in African art seriously, McNaughton needed to experience the art firsthand before coming to his own realizations. This desire to see and feel for himself led him to study the art of sub-Saharan Africa and, particularly, the arts of Mande-speaking people in West Africa.

When he lucked into the Sidi Ballo performance, McNaughton was actually in Mali conducting research on Mande-speaking blacksmiths for his eventual book (*The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power and Art in Western Africa*, IU Press, 1988). With a history probably dating back to before the time of Christ, blacksmiths in West Africa are renowned for their sophisticated iron-working skills, consummate craftsmanship, and technological acumen, McNaughton says. They begin training at a very early age with relatives or other blacksmiths so that by adulthood they have mastered the techniques of being a blacksmith.

Their immense skill places Mande blacksmiths in high social regard. They also are believed to possess extraordinary amounts of a Jedi-like force, *nyama*, which gives them special power in their communities. Blacksmiths are considered to be born with *nyama* that they manipulate to the benefit of other community members and themselves, McNaughton explains. "It's part of their heritage, and it's one reason they have so much clout and authority."

Indeed, blacksmiths are often called upon by community members and leaders to act as advisors or negotiators,

McNaughton says. He recalls a time a blacksmith was summoned by a woman who wanted a divorce from her husband. The woman thought her family probably wouldn't approve of the divorce, so she turned to the blacksmith to help convince her parents. In the end, she got the divorce.

Added together, their energy, expertise, and experience make blacksmiths powerful players in the region and central to the concepts, institutions, and beliefs that permeate Mande society, McNaughton says. Not surprisingly, it also makes their art—and art across so many cultures in Africa—amazingly effective.

To illustrate his point, McNaughton points to a poster that graces the wall of his African-themed office in the Fine Arts Building at IU Bloomington. The poster is from a past exhibition at the IU Art Museum and features a photograph of a Nigerian wood sculpture. The sculpture depicts a female figure with broad shoulders and clenched fists. The woman tilts backward, almost like a soccer player about to head the ball into the goal.

“Look at that,” McNaughton says. “Look at the proportions, the shoulders, the breasts, the head. How she is leaning back and arching, like there's all this pent-up energy. Good god, that is sophisticated! That's hot stuff, and not accidental. That's someone who was really thinking.

“This art is just spectacular,” McNaughton continues. “It's loaded with aesthetic sophistication, and that's something that, for a very long time, was ignored by African art historians.”

SORCERY AT WORK

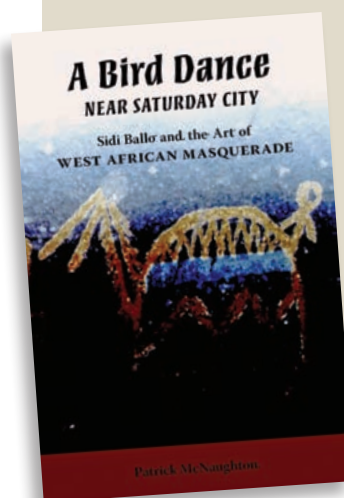
During his exhausting and difficult bird dance at Dogoduman, Sidi Ballo hits a wall—literally.

In a high-speed maneuver, one that comes with scant warning for the audience, the bird flies through the air and crashes into the wall of a house. Remarkably, as if by magic, the bird holds its horizontal position, seemingly levitating on the wall, just long enough to cause the audience to hold its collective breath and wonder how a masquerade dancer could possibly hover in mid-air. To add even more intrigue, the bird's head comes out and looks around quizzically, as if he were wondering the same thing as the audience.

For McNaughton, such stunning and dramatic moments occur when an artist incorporates all the resources at his or her disposal to create art that garners intellectual and emotional attention. Chief among those resources, he says, are aesthetics. In McNaughton's view, aesthetics are all about choices—the essentially calculated choices that an artist makes to deliver the most effective and efficient performance. As IU colleague Daniel Reed, an associate professor of folklore and ethnomusicology, says in his book *Dan Ge Performance: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire* (IU Press, 2003), “Patrick McNaughton argues that aesthetics are ‘strategies for organizing the resources that become form.’” Reed goes on to say that,



Photo courtesy of Patrick McNaughton



Patrick McNaughton, Chancellor's Professor of African Art in the Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts, visits with Sidi Ballo, virtuoso bird dancer, and his twin daughters, in 1998. McNaughton first witnessed Ballo's bird dance masquerade in the small town of Dogoduman in 1978. In 2008, McNaughton's book about the dance's artistic power, *A Bird Dance near Saturday City*, was published by Indiana University Press. In the book, the performance of Sidi Ballo is McNaughton's vehicle for understanding the power of aesthetics as a cultural phenomenon.

considered this way, aesthetics are inseparable from the idea of strategy.

Sidi Ballo strategically used aesthetics—the beauty of his masquerade costume and the quality of his dancing—to his advantage. This dedication to aesthetics—along with his finely honed athletic prowess, experience, improvisational acumen, ability to play off an audience, and, as McNaughton likes to say, “sorcery”—created a performance of overwhelming potency.

“Aesthetics are a deep-seated and profoundly effective social tool,” McNaughton says. “When people know how to make things that have affect, they know how to really get to you. And once you're in that state, then you're more inclined to think, to be reflective.

“Art is infinitely more than entertainment,” he continues. “It's a forum for you to think about who you are, what your society is, how you fit with your society, and how it is that you can fit within your society. I see art as a laboratory for growth. And aesthetics are a big part of what makes that laboratory effective. You can look at a piece of art that's not very good and won't give it a second thought. At the same time, you can look at something spectacular and really start to think.”

RYAN PIUREK is assistant director of Indiana University Communications and a freelance writer in Bloomington, Ind.