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The Wall Sculptures of Abomey

Francesca Pique, Leslie Rainer

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The Republic of Benin in West Africa is home to more than 40 ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Fon. During the early 17th century, the Fon established a society ruled by a dynasty of kings, who over the years forged the powerful kingdom of Dahomey. In their capital city of Abomey, the rulers built a remarkable complex of palaces which became the centre of the kingdom's political, social and religious life. The palace walls were decorated with colourful low-relief sculptures, or bas-reliefs, recounting legends and battles and glorifying the dynasty's region. In a society with no written language, these visual stories have perpetuated the history and myths of the Fon people. This work combines colour photographs of the bas-reliefs with a history of Dahomey, complemented by rare historical images. As well as seeking to provide a portrait of these narrative sculptures, the book details the collaborative efforts of the Benin Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Getty Conservation Institute to conserve the reliefs; describes the Historic Museum of Abomey, now housed in the palace compound; and discusses the continuing popularity of bas-reliefs in contemporary Beninois art.

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