



# Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas (African Art)

*Robert Farris Thompson*

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Robert Farris Thompson, Professor of the History of African and African-American Art at Yale University, has been working on this study of African-Atlantic altars for twenty-five years. *Face of the Gods* is based on fieldwork in both Africa and the Americas - in Mali, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Zaire, the Central African Republic, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, on the eastern part of the Atlantic, and in Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Suriname, the United States, Brazil, and Argentina, on the western. The book shows how the Africans and their descendants in the three continents worship not only before points of reverence, foci of sacrifice and prayer, but also, in certain areas, through sacred happening climaxed by possession. In the Afro-Atlantic world the concept "altar" is double: fixed (tree, fire, stone, dais) and moving (ring shouts, dancing, handclapping, circling, ecstasy), leading ultimately to visitation by healing spirits under God. *Face of the Gods* is an introduction, the first in any language, to a brand-new field in art history: the comparative study of Afro-Atlantic altars. Tracing icons and philosophies in altar-making from major African civilizations to the Americas, the book restores many works of art, long considered in isolation from each other, to their original constellating power. *Face of the Gods* is richly illustrated with full-color plates. The book opens with the fire altars of the foraging Mbuti, of the Ituri Forest in northeastern Zaire, and of the San, of Namibia. Next it describes minkisi, the extraordinary medicines of God still made in Kongo and the Kongo-influenced civilizations of Central Africa. The minkisi tradition, Thompson shows, traveled intact across the Atlantic. In Havana as in the Bronx, it expands in altars to Afro-Cuban deities such as Sarabanda, its complex symbolic constructions sometimes artfully contained in as small and secret a place as an apartment closet. Likewise derived from Kongo belief are Brazilian tree-alta

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