

Memories of a Unique Exhibit

The Civilization of Llhuros: An Exhibition of Artifacts from the Recent Excavations of Vanibo, Houndee, Draikum, and other sites

(Review of 1972 Catalog and and Exhibition)

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Avoraciousreader | *4.0 out of 5 stars*

Probably the single most fondly remembered art exhibition I have ever seen remains The Civilization of Llhuros, which I was fortunate enough to stumble across during its original tenure at Cornell University. The exhibit was a true multimedia experience: evocative, somewhat dim lighting (as I recall .. this was a long time ago); carefully arranged objects on the walls and pedestals, complete with suitably arcane labels and discussion, maps, photos and old drawings of objects in situ; subdued Llhurosian music playing in the background, mysterious plinks and plonks not quite like anything else I'd heard; and I believe even a video. Occupying several rooms, it virtually took over (again in my recollection ;-)--Cornell's art museum of the time, in the Andrew Dickson White building. I also believe it was the last exhibit at the White Museum, before the art museum moved to a hideous new structure on the scenic Lib Slope. The exhibit toured both in the US and Europe, before being stashed away in crates ... and, I just learned through the miracle of google (a technique no doubt anticipated by the ancient savants of Llhuros), was resurrected in part for a retrospective at Cornell in 2004. (The only thing that keeps this catalog from an enthusiastic 5* rating is that it doesn't, indeed probably couldn't, live up to the exhibit itself.)

The Civilization of Llhuros was indeed convincing (a Cornell faculty member was rumored to complain "It's a fraud!"), with its plethora of supporting detail, but in reality was the entire creation of art professor Norman Daly, who was also "Director of Llhuroscian Studies" at Cornell (per the catalog ;-). My treasured copy of the exhibit catalog certainly brings back memories, but unfortunately cannot completely recreate the experience of the exhibit itself. Of course it is missing the music, the whole ambience of the exhibit, and is rather typical (in a final bid at authenticity, perhaps) of many exhibit catalogs, more a matter of academic completeness than reader enjoyment. The monochrome photos are merely adequate, though mostly on the good side of adequate, and range in size from 2" x 2.5" to a few full page ones. It's hard to say how much they will appeal to the uninitiated reader, as opposed to being evocative of memories, however dim, of the actual objects. Every item in the exhibit is seemingly cataloged, but

only perhaps half are pictured -- after all, how many pictures of the numerous trallibs do you really need to see? But I do wish they had found room for catalog number 27 "Pair of Sodomites, Minor Officials / Archaic / Lead / Height: 8.5 cm. / Though vote-getting and canvassing in the broadest sense of the words involved sodomy, it was not known if the voter was the activator or recipient of this wholly political gesture." Or maybe # 27 is better viewed in the imagination's eye (I have no recollection of this object) than the camera's.

The catalog includes a ten page introduction, complete with meditations on the rise and decline of Llhuroscian civilization, quoting numerous authorities such as Brent Colburn Towle, Phillip Ewing-Kershaw, Dr. Chai Lung Lee, and "the eminent Llhuroscian art critic," Sir Hilliard Cecil Smallpiece (an ironic name, given the Llhuroscian obsession with extreme phallic development). The exact history of Llhuros is a bit vague as to its correlation with the standard calendar, but it is divided into Archaic (Early, middle, Late), Middle Period (including Naciremian*, Trolydos and Draikum), and Decline. Analysis is not lacking: "The Llhuroscians were inveterate ritualists who assiduously cultivated a brooding and possibly indelible guilt complex that could only be ameliorated by appeasing the gods through self-affliction," particularly through the rite of stilt-walking while carrying a bird on the head. The fall of Llhuroscian civilization is variously attributed to "the absolute collapse of ethics and an adynamic licentiousness of crapulous animalism" [Towle] or "the direct product of an apathy of staggering proportions" [Daly].

Daly's puckish sense of humor, so evident in the written word, also shows through in the objects themselves. Some are created ab initio, but the majority incorporate found objects, combined, modified, patinated. This is unfortunately not as apparent in the photographs as it was at the exhibit, but when looked for is readily seen. The most obvious, perhaps, is catalog number 80, "TRALLIB (Oil Container)", which bears a striking resemblance to a lemon or orange juicer, with the central juice extracting projection turning this into a "phallic type" (perhaps a reference to the Robert Johnson lines, "Squeeze my lemon, baby/ till the juice run down my leg"?). A 4-5 page interview with Prof. Daly follows the catalog, and a page by Cornell anthro/archeo prof Robert Ascher.

There is a website [civilizationofllurhos-dot-org] which seems to have the goal of reproducing the exhibit experience online. But it is "under construction" with a note "Coming Fall 2008". It isn't clear if this was a project of Professor Daly himself, but unfortunately he passed away on April 2, 2008.

I don't know if there were further editions, but my copy notes that "Two thousand

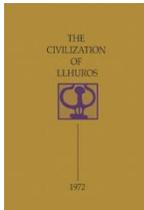
copies of this catalog were printed by Artcraft of Ithaca, Incorporated, Ithaca, New York." The copyright is 1971.

* "Naciremian" era. An obvious reference to a famous 1956 anthropological spoof, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," which viewed American (Nacirema spelled backwards) society as a future archaeologist might, and is available on-line at msu.edu/~jdowell/miner.html

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