New York’s now defunct Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) opened its landmark exhibition Senufo Sculpture from West Africa in February 1963. Under the directorship of modernist art historian Robert Goldwater, the MPA displayed together for the first time ever a stunning array of arts attributed to Senufo artists, patrons, and audiences. Exaggerated yet delicate face masks, composite yet integrated zoomorphic helmet masks, and geometric yet gentle figurative sculptures exemplify the MPA’s vision of the Senufo style. In the book accompanying the exhibition, Goldwater described a cultural context for Senufo communities in a region spanning the borders of present-day Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali. More than fifty years later, Gagliardi’s Senufo draws on archival, museum, and field-based data, including previously unpublished letters, photographs, and objects, to look back at the MPA’s tour de force. Senufo investigates the making of Senufoess since the late nineteenth century, when the French government seized cities and captured political rivals as part of its colonization efforts in the region. The book explores a mid-twentieth-century convergence of Catholic missionaries, an art dealer, and an iconoclastic movement in northern Côte d’Ivoire that led to an exodus of iconic objects from Africa to Europe and North America. And it examines the presence and absence in communities identified as Senufo of poro, a great patron for the arts and an institution at the core of certain constructions of Senufo identity. Joining historical analysis with eye-catching sculptures, Senufo offers expanded views of a dynamic region’s arts and identities.

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