

INTRODUCTION

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The visual arts of Africa range from body decoration, such as scarification, body painting, jewelry, and dress, to architecture, household objects, musical instruments, and sculpture, usually in the form of figures and masks. This catalogue and exhibition focus on sculpture, that portion of African art that has prompted the strongest aesthetic reaction in the West.

The sculptures in the exhibition were produced by settled agricultural peoples living south of the Sahara. The peoples that produced these works live in a large area ranging from the Western Sudan and the Guinea Coast of West Africa to the equatorial forest stretching eastward from the Atlantic coast of Gabon across northern Zaire and to the drainage basin of the Zaire River reaching as far as the Great Lakes of Central Africa. Little sculpture is produced by cattle-keeping and nomadic peoples. Thus, except for a few outposts in East Africa and Madagascar, the concentration of sculpture-producing groups is in West and Central Africa.

To those who approach African sculpture for the first time, it will seem to bear little resemblance to the well-known forms of Western art that lend comfort when they are revisited. Far from contempt, familiarity breeds appreciation. In contrast to well-known forms of Western art, exotic forms in unfamiliar styles abound in African sculpture: oversized heads, squat bodies, conventionalized feet and hands, and stiff, often symmetrical, gestures. Human figures are usually frontal, nude, and unambiguously male or female. Masks may be human in form or a mixture of animal with animal or animal with human forms. The approach to these objects should be tempered with some tolerance until the aesthetics and the meanings become more familiar.

First encountered during the Renaissance and seen as curiosities made by exotic peoples, the sculptures were

not considered by outsiders as art. Christian and Islamic missionaries, in their attempts to convert Africans from their traditional religions, dismissed the sculptures as evidence of benighted heathen savagery. Only in the early years of the twentieth century did artists and critics in Europe "discover" African sculpture. In their search for new forms to break away from what they considered an aesthetically bankrupt past, Western artists turned to the forms of non-Western and non-Oriental cultures. They clumped the arts of Oceania, particularly Melanesia, with the arts of Africa in their delight with forms that did not spring from Oriental traditions or European classicism or naturalism. Their adulation was based on the forms themselves; they had only the most nebulous and romanticized ideas of the cultures or contexts that produced them.

In general, art historians deal with a number of aspects of the art object. They may study the style or form of the works and how they change over time. They may deal with the artists, techniques, patronage, iconography, or the role of art in the place and time of its origin. At times, art historians may deal with the objects out of their time, as with the impact that classical works had on the Renaissance or African art had on the early twentieth century.

The approach of style has often been used in the study of the sculpture of Africa south of the Sahara. Distinct styles are discernible, and a presentation of these styles in a geographical pattern of distribution has been the norm since the mid-1930s, particularly after the publications of the Danish scholar and collector Carl Kjersmeier.

In addition, there have been several serious studies of the history and archaeology of the arts of African kingdoms but almost none of noncentralized societies. The

artist has been the focal point of several publications. In contrast, few studies of the form, patronage, or iconography of African art have been published.

This catalogue focuses primarily on the cultural meaning of the sculptures. Indeed, they have been selected with their cultural context as a major consideration. They are presented as agents of social stability, religion, and social control. However, neither history nor style is ignored. History is discussed when there is evidence for the age of the individual piece or its style.

Art historians and others have developed an interest in the relation of the objects to the societies that gave rise to them (see, for example, von Sydow 1930, and, posthumously, 1954). It has been particularly since about 1950 that many art historians have concentrated on the study of African art in its cultural setting. Many recent publications, articles, monographs, and exhibition catalogues have focused on the cultural role of the objects.

Much of what we see and discuss about African sculpture relates to a way of life that has been significantly affected in the past century by changes in transportation, economics, medicine, and education, as well as political change. Few of these attempted a frontal attack on traditional art and religion, as did the colonial policies and Christian and Islamic missionizing. Nonetheless, they had the subtle but demonstrable effect of undermining the old values that supported the arts and religion. For example, new, more accessible modes of transportation offered experiences and vistas that undercut the local sense of group unity, history, and style; imported medicine often undermined unqualified acceptance of divination and herbalism and the religious beliefs that supported them; and schools, especially boarding schools, separated children from the old ways of education, such as learning by working with parents, apprenticeship, and especially the semiformalized training that took place in the initiation schools. In those schools, values were transmitted as the children learned the history of the group, sex education, the morals and ethics of marriage and adult activities, "secrets" of the men or women, and, in some cases, the opportunity to learn a craft.

Political change has resulted in the substitution of the concept of nation for the older focus on the group, or tribe. Further, independence has, in many nations, replaced the attitudes of the colonialists and missionaries with a sense of the importance of traditional values, of the heritage of the past, such as the revival of older, pre-European forms of dress.

In dealing with the art of Africa, one is immediately faced with the question of which grammatical tense should be used with reference to the sculpture. To use the present tense would be to imply that all the objects and their supporting cultures were functioning today. This is patently not true. To use the past tense would be to speak as if all the objects and their settings were irretrievably a part of the past. This is equally untrue. It would be prudent to follow the lead of the Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti, who states in his book *African Religions and Philosophy*:

In my description I have generally used the present tense, as if these ideas are still held and the practices being carried out. Everyone is aware that rapid changes are taking place in Africa, so that traditional ideas are being abandoned, modified or coloured by the changing situation. At the same time it would be wrong to imagine that everything traditional has been changed or forgotten so much that no traces of it are to be found. If anything, the changes are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking patterns, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples, though obviously this differs from individual to individual and from place to place. . . . the majority of our people with little or no formal education still hold on to their traditional corpus of beliefs and practices. . . . (1969, xi)

Beliefs connected with magic, witchcraft, the spirits and the living-dead (the ancestors) are areas of traditional religions which are in no danger of immediate abandonment. (ibid., 274)

Thus the present tense will be used in discussions concerning objects dating from the recent past, and the past tense will be used only for archaeological objects and those cases where we know that the objects reflect a way of life totally lost.

History

The study of history in sub-Saharan Africa is dependent on two sources: on the one hand, written reports of outsiders (travelers, missionaries, merchants, and colonial officers) and, on the other hand, oral traditions. Written reports are useful at times but are generally unsatisfactory because they are rare, scattered, and discontinuous. Few refer to the arts, fewer still offer useful illustrations that would relate to the history of styles or forms.

Oral traditions are a form of history that cannot be judged by the same rules as our Western sense of history. The precision that is characteristic of the latter is absent;

instead, time may be couched in terms of the memory of individuals who recall events or people, or it may be formalized in terms of recited histories of kings or dynasties. Oral traditions may unconsciously change over time, because memory is selective and fallible, or they may be consciously reinterpreted for political or other reasons. Mbiti suggests a further caution that in oral traditions time tends to be condensed:

History and prehistory tend to be telescoped into a very compact, oral tradition . . . handed down from generation to generation. If we attempt to fit such traditions into a mathematical time-scale, they would appear to cover only a few centuries whereas in reality they stretch much further back; and some of them, being in the form of myths, defy any attempt to describe them on a mathematical time-scale. In any case oral history has no dates to be remembered. (ibid., 24)

He also notes that Africans do not look forward to an end of the world, only back to an endless rhythm of days, seasons, and years. To these there is no end. Further,

human life has another rhythm of nature which nothing can destroy. On the level of the individual, this rhythm includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed . . . these are the key moments in the life of the individual. On the community or national level, there is the cycle of the seasons with their different activities like sowing, cultivating, harvesting and hunting. (ibid., 25)

In addition, there are abnormal, often traumatic, events such as droughts, disease, or infertility that interrupt the normal cycles of life or the seasons.

Therefore it is evident that oral traditions are open to a number of cautions. Because they are based on memory, they are constantly open to change and may reflect revisionist "history," akin perhaps to mythology, rather than objective history in the Western sense. Even when oral traditions seem trustworthy in describing the history of a type of object or its cultural support, such traditions never describe an object in so detailed a fashion that we can reconstruct its form or style from the oral evidence. Indeed, because most African sculptures are made of perishable substances—wood and other vegetable materials—they are usually easy prey to insects and the climate and rarely survive more than a generation or two before they disappear and must be replaced. Exceptions do exist where the wood used is hard, the care extensive, and the climate conducive to the preservation of the work. Such is the case with some of the

sculptures of the Bamana (cat. no. 5) and others (for example, cat. no. 73) who lived in the Western Sudan, where the dry climate has helped ensure the long life of some carvings.

In most instances only those objects in relatively durable materials—such as metal or fired clay—survive. Pottery, even broken, offers the archaeologist evidence of the cultures that once occupied a site or an area. Sequences of form and modeled, painted, impressed, or incised decoration reflect cultural changes and give some hint of the changing history of an area. Figures modeled in clay and then fired are among the earliest evidence of sculptural activity in sub-Saharan Africa. The Nok terra-cottas of northern Nigeria dating to perhaps two thousand years ago are one example (cat. no. 72). Later examples are known from the inland delta region of the Niger River, the Djenné terra-cottas (cat. no. 4).

Some metal objects have been recovered archaeologically from societies or periods now lost, such as at Igbo-Ukwu and Ife in Nigeria, and some have survived above ground, for instance, those from kingdoms that were known to early European travelers, such as the Nigerian kingdom of Benin (cat. nos. 45–46).

For the greater part the arts of Africa do not long survive, and most of what we know of the forms and styles has been derived from objects in perishable materials collected within the past century. And these rarely have seen more than a generation or two of use. One extremely rare exception is the wooden Yoruba divination board (cat. no. 30), which was collected before 1659.

Nearly every African sculpture in a museum, collection, or exhibition has had its life cycle interrupted. Made to be used and then used up or perhaps accidentally destroyed by fire, climate, or insects, the sculptures were meant to be replaced. The replacement quite literally took the place of the lost piece, which in itself had most probably been a replacement. I once was shown a broken terra-cotta figure of a queen mother among the Kwahu of Ghana. The chief who showed it to me noted that it was newly broken and that it would now have to be replaced. The broken one was said to be the funerary terra-cotta made for the first queen mother of the village some two-and-one-half centuries earlier. However, it was, in style, clearly no more than about thirty years old. It was a replacement, removed an unknown number of times from the original, and yet was spoken of as if it were the original. The continuity was unbroken, the piece *did* represent the early queen mother, and the con-

cern of the art historian to date the particular work was quite clearly not the concern of the village chief.

Finally, we will make a major mistake if we attempt to see in African art some reflection of our own remote past. African art is not the echo of an early stage in human evolution, a historical remnant of a frozen culture. Rather, it springs from cultures that have at least as long a history, albeit a quite different one, as cultures anywhere else.

In the recent past the arts of non-Western and non-Oriental cultures have been grouped as "primitive," implying simpler or earlier in an evolutionary sense. In both meanings the term is misleading: "in matters of religion, as of art, there are no 'simpler' peoples, only some peoples with simpler technologies than our own. Man's 'imaginative' and 'emotional' life is always and everywhere rich and complex" (Turner 1969, 3). In Africa the "simpler technology" was based on fire and human muscle power as the sole sources of energy. "Before European contact in the nineteenth century, [Africans south of the Sahara] did not employ the wheel, the lever or the inclined plane, and writing was unknown" (Prince 1964, 85).

Thus, in this exhibition and catalogue, the focus is not on the Westernized history of the objects but rather on the "history" of African lives and events as they appear in traditional culture. Instead of showing art objects within a single African group, we have chosen to range over the subcontinent, selecting works quite arbitrarily—choosing a mask here and a figure there as they fit the focal points of the cycle of life.

Aesthetics

Each work of African art springs from an ethnic unit that has a particular history and that has made certain decisions about style, form, and aesthetics. It is necessary to realize that those choices guided the production of the objects with which we are concerned. It is necessary also to be careful in our use of the term *aesthetics*, which carries a great deal of associated baggage in our culture. The literal meaning, the perception of the beautiful or the tasteful, is often based on the arts of the Greeks, and that perception is carried as the canon for all works of art anywhere and anytime.

It is not therefore surprising that African sculpture was considered ugly, the antithesis of beautiful, by early observers. Further, it was condemned by Westerners on religious terms as the product of heathen savages. Thus a double rejection: ugly and un-Christian. The earliest expression of interest in African sculpture was as objects

of curiosity from strange and distant peoples. Ignored as art, objects having widely differing uses and meanings for Africans were lumped together and exhibited in curiosity cabinets alongside exotica from botany, geology, and zoology. Even when the "natives" were believed to be close to nature and admirable in their simple lives as "noble savages," their sculpture was not regarded as art.

Western attitudes toward non-Western societies began to change with the development of anthropology, yet with this change the works of the African artist were relegated to the anthropological sections of natural history museums. In Europe today the finest African sculpture collections are part of larger anthropology collections in natural history museums.

African art was "discovered" by artists and critics early in the twentieth century. Its influence on modern Western art has been studied and reported from the point of view of its formal impact (Rubin, 1984). No serious early attempt was made to discern the role, meaning, or aesthetics from the point of view of the African producers.

Elsewhere in this catalogue the roles and meanings of the sculptures are discussed. Here we must consider the choices made and the decisions taken, the aesthetics that influenced their production.

Often, as in my experience among the Igala, when an African is asked to explain his preference for one sculpture over another, his reply will be that it is better carved. In short, the judgment seems based solely on skill. But this term used cross-culturally may be deceiving; it can mean significantly more than excellence of execution. It includes the degree of success with which a carver can produce a form in the style, size, color, and material expected of him by his audience. Daniel Crowley, writing specifically of the Chokwe, suggests that "knowing how to make an object well *includes* knowing how to make it beautiful, a standard which would hold for most craftsmen in other cultures, including our own" (1973, 228). In short, skill is the ability to create recognizable, acceptable variations of a shared stylistic, formal, and aesthetic norm. This may mean, in one African culture, that the sculpture may be quite simple (cat. no. 34) and in another highly complex and detailed (cat. no. 31) or that a head is carved abstractly (cat. no. 33) or naturalistically (cat. no. 59). Equal skill must be expended in the production of unlike forms, ranging from simple to complex and abstract to naturalistic.

The definition of skill must be enlarged to include the expectancy of the familiar, which results in acceptance and approval of the familiar and rejection and disap-

proval of the unfamiliar. The detail with which Africans discuss their expectancies varies considerably from group to group. As noted, the Igala seem to stop with the expression of the work as well carved. The Yoruba of Nigeria, however, have a set of criteria of excellence, as discerned by Robert Farris Thompson. He states that there exists, "locked in the minds of kings, priests and commoners, a reservoir of artistic criticism. Wherever tapped, this source lends clarity to our understanding of the arts of tropical Africa" (1973, 19). Based on interviews with eighty-eight informants, he arrived at eighteen criteria of excellence, among them the following: *midpoint mimesis*, the balance between resemblance and likeness, not too specific (for example, not to show the wrinkles of age) and yet not too abstract; *visibility*, the clarity of form and line; *shining smoothness*, a polished surface that plays against the shadows of incised lines; *emotional proportion*, the size of parts related to their emotional emphasis rather than naturalism, for example, oversized (from our point of view) heads; *positioning*, proper placement of the parts of the body, really a part of proportion; *composition*, which relates to positioning as the siting of the parts, both mimetic and emotional, in a composition; *delicacy*, the fineness of detail, small, narrow, slender (grossness is its opposite); *roundness*, a full rounding of small masses in relation to larger masses; *protrusions*, the pleasing bulge; *pleasing angularity*, an alternative to roundness; *straightness*, erectness of sculpture; *symmetry*; *skill*; and *ephebism*, perhaps the most important criterion, the depiction of a person in the prime of life (ibid., 31–57).

The depiction of people in the prime of life seems to be a criterion of a great deal of African art. Almost never are childlike qualities or the ravages of age depicted. Instead, an ideal adult age is suggested. Herbert Cole reports that his research among the Igbo in Nigeria agrees with Thompson's ephebism, that is, the depiction in sculpture of "all human beings at the productive age of young adulthood" (1983a, 21). Susan Vogel reports essentially the same attitude among the Baule of Côte

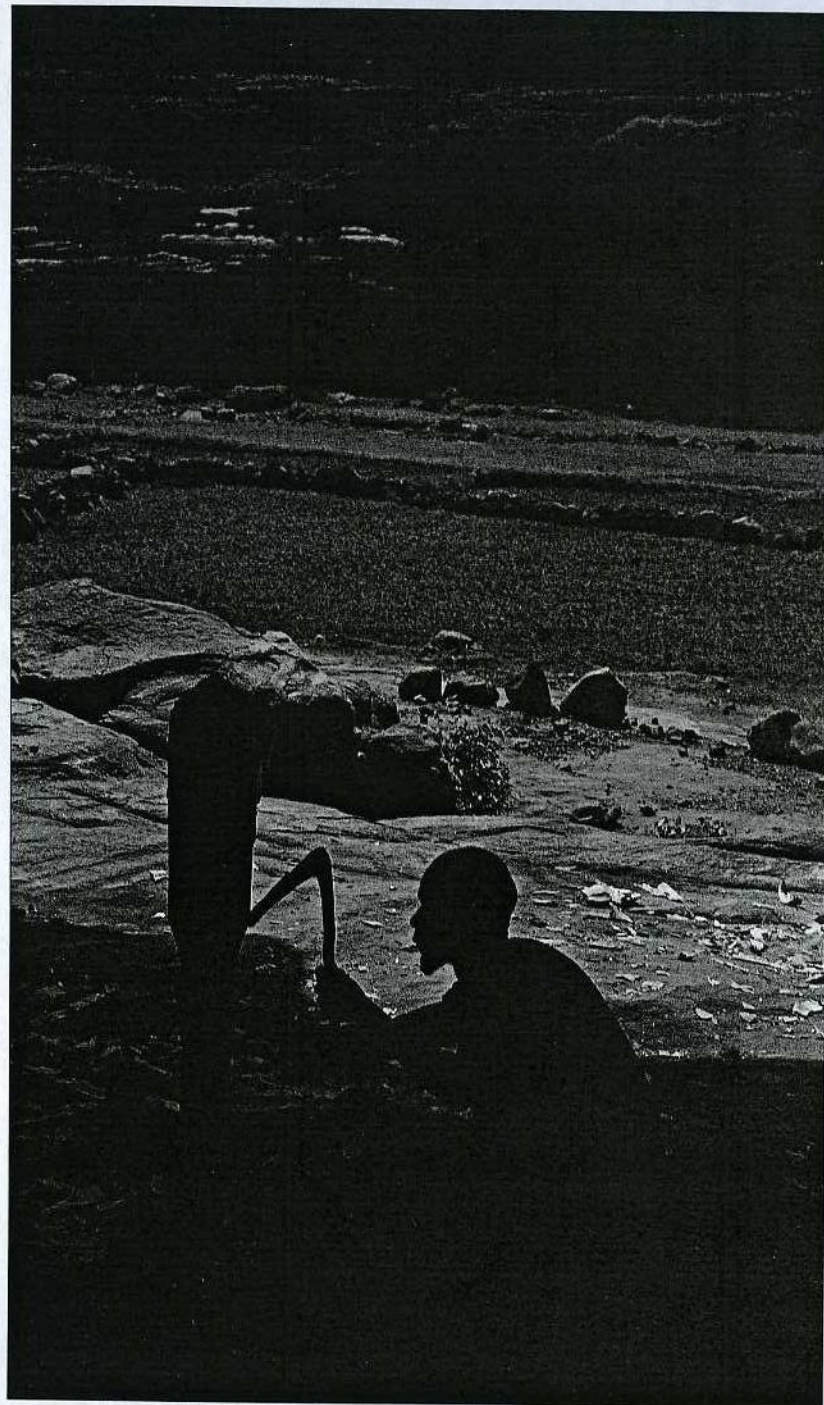


FIG. 1. Dogon sculptor,
Upper Ogot village, Mali, 1970.
Most African sculptors work
in isolation away from the
village proper. The most common
wood-carving tool is the adze.

d'Ivoire: "their praise of youthful features and their disapproval of anything old looking is linked with their praise of fertility, health, strength and the ability to work hard" (1980, 13). In general, the images of royalty and ancestors are shown as youthful but fully developed adults, for example, the Benin queen mother (cat. no. 46) and the Hemba ancestor (cat. no. 81) from Zaïre. When infants or children are shown, they are depicted as attributes of motherhood, not as discrete personalities.

No one else has presented as full a set of criteria as Thompson, but many other scholars refer to some that are similar: Crowley notes bisymmetry, smooth finish, efficient control of tools, figures that stand up, and fineness (1973, 246-47); Vogel notes symmetry, fineness, and delicacy and adds richness of materials such as gold and ivory (1985, XII); and James Fernandez discusses balance (1966, 56).

Vogel (1980), working among the Baule in Côte d'Ivoire, found remarkable agreement among the thirty-five informants she interviewed in their aesthetic ranking of eleven figure carvings. She notes that there emerged a number of similarities with Thompson's report of Yoruba aesthetics, including balance and moderation of forms and deliberation in the sense of placement (Thompson's *positioning*). Philip Ravenhill, also reporting on the Baule, notes the aesthetic of moderation or a "happy medium" thus: "a given physical attribute should ideally be 'just so' . . . being neither too pronounced nor too diminutive" (1980, 7). When the Baule state "a neck should not be too long ('like a camel') nor too short ('like a cricket'), nor too thick, they do not mean thereby that a neck should be average, rather it should approach the *ideal* of [an] elegant or beautiful . . . neck" (ibid.).

Both Vogel and Ravenhill report that the Baule relate the beauty of statuettes to the beauty of the idealized human figure (Vogel 1980, 19; Ravenhill 1980, 9). "Statuary form derives from an idealization of human form, but in turn the creation of wooden ideals has a feedback effect which affects the appreciation of human beauty, as, for example, when one says 'his nose is as straight as though it were sculpted'" (Ravenhill 1980, 9). At the same time, the Baule have a widespread preference for "slightly irregular and asymmetric forms," but this must be a "balanced" or "gentle" asymmetry to be acceptable (Vogel 1980, 16).

It should be noted that for several groups, including the Baule, the Ibibio, and the Igala, a damaged figure "is often considered unworthy of aesthetic judgment"

(ibid., 14). New figures are considered stronger than old figures. "The Baule consider a new thing as strong and vigorous whether it is a young person, a sculpture, or a cult" (ibid., 13; see Crowley 1973, 246).

In contrast, there are cultures that recognize that a decorated object is preferable to an undecorated one but do not make aesthetic comparisons between decorated objects. Fred T. Smith, for example, discusses the concept of *bambolse* among the Gurense of northern Ghana. The term *bambolse*, which "means 'embellished,' 'decorated,' 'made more attractive,' or 'it looks good,'" refers only to deliberately aesthetic wall decorations made by Gurense women (Smith 1979, 203). "But at the same time, the aesthetic quality . . . can not be openly praised or criticized" (ibid., 204). Smith argues that the Gurense "do not have a definite voiced aesthetic for the visual arts. To criticize or to engage in formal analysis is considered a form of anti-social and disruptive behavior" (ibid.). Crowley notes that among the Chokwe, "undecorated objects have less value than decorated" (1973, 247). Among the Pokot of Kenya the critical point, as reported by Harold Schneider, is that a useful object becomes art *only* if it is decorated (1956, 104). It should be added that neither the Gurense nor the Pokot produce figurative sculpture. Others have equated art with decoration, but mostly for two-dimensional objects rather than three-dimensional sculpture.

There are also those groups that do not evaluate the aesthetic appeal of what we would call works of art. For example, Daniel Biebuyck notes that when he was among the Lega,

after decades of harassment from Arab raiders and colonial administrators, traditional artists were no longer at work in Legaland. . . . The patrons of the arts, high ranking initiates who own, use and interpret the objects make no evaluation of quality; for them to speak about the relative aesthetic appeal of art objects would be an infraction of the bwami code, which claims that all *isengo* are *busoga*, good-and-beautiful, because they are accepted and consecrated in bwami. (1973, 177)

He summarizes the situation thus: "In the years I spent among the Lega, I never heard aesthetic evaluations of art objects" (ibid.).

Vogel notes that in some instances we would, from our Western point of view, have made the same aesthetic decision as that made by the African (1985, XI). Her example is the choice made by a Yoruba chief between two Yoruba carvers in which the work of the one selected is, to a Western eye, preferable to the one rejected

by the chief when works by both carvers have survived. Rarely do we have examples of this kind; they are, indeed, too rare to assume that our aesthetic taste and that of the Africans ultimately coincide. As Vogel notes, however, we "can consider the chosen artist's style a standard of excellence against which the efforts of other artists of the region must be measured" (*ibid.*).

Indeed, works that have survived and that show signs of use have obviously met some set of criteria. We may assume that they were at least basically acceptable in terms of form, style, and aesthetic quality.

It is apparent that there are differing degrees of verbalized aesthetic responses among Africans, but the degree to which we can assess their differences is limited by the few studies that have been published. It may, in some instances, be futile to search for the developed vocabulary with which the Yoruba and the Baule express their taste. Indeed, there are those who argue that without the words to express it, there can be no aesthetic (Crowley 1973, 224). However, if we avoid Western cultural prejudices associated with the term *aesthetics* and focus on the response to the object, which is what Thompson seems to have done, it may be possible to get close to an understanding of the aesthetic and, indeed, to see if there are universals involved. For example, do all African peoples tend to prefer symmetry, delicacy, and/or ephebism? Also, we must judge responses according to the role and place of the informant in his culture. Thompson, quite rightly, depended heavily on chiefs, artists, and other seemingly knowledgeable Yoruba.

But more than words may be needed in cultures less verbally complex than the Yoruba. It may be that responses can be noted that are positional or gestural. As I have discussed elsewhere (Sieber 1973, 428), many gestures in our society can be interpreted as judgmental, such as refusing to shake hands or holding one's nose. To observe the excited response of an African audience at a masquerade, to follow their expressions of approval and, at times, awe, is to realize that "aesthetic" responses exist, although they may be neither finely drawn nor verbally realized. Such responses, if recorded and analyzed, could bring into focus the nature of response as a cue to a better understanding of aesthetics.

Another note should be made. It is necessary to be extremely cautious when asking an informant for a comparative response between two objects. The objects must be of the same type and the same degree of importance to the informant. The alternative is to make the error I did in asking Igala informants for a critique of

two masks, one an Egu Orumamu, the major mask of the Igala, the other a mask of significantly less importance. I realized my error when I found unanimous preference for the "more important" mask, the Egu Orumamu, over the other. Obviously the choice was based on importance, not aesthetics. Attempting to correct the situation, I asked informants to choose between two Egu Orumamu masks, only to discover that they refused to choose between the two quite distinct masks because they were equally powerful, equally important.

Finally, an open question as to whether the term for beautiful also means good. As we have noted, Biebuyck reports on the Lega that all Bwami association ritual objects were "good-and-beautiful," although no aesthetic choices were made (1973, 177). Vogel argues that beautiful and good are equivalent and are the opposites of ugly and evil (1980; 1985, XIII). She notes that nearly all words used in aesthetic judgments by the Baule have a moral as well as a physical sense; thus she suggests that good/beautiful and bad/ugly be read as opposite pairs (1980, 8). There is perhaps another reading; works of art in Africa are predominantly used positively and are part of an open, often public, reinforcement of positive social values. Only the black arts of witchcraft and sorcery are secret and antisocial. Therefore the public arts are by definition good in the sense that a larger social benefit is meant.

Style

The reader of this catalogue or the viewer of the exhibition will have seen more types and styles of African sculpture than any traditional African would have experienced. This is because each sculpture had its particular reason for being among the people that supported it. And each culture and the sculptural style it developed had a limited geographical distribution. Thus most Africans would know little of what was produced at any distance from their home area.

Style will be identified in terms of the people of origin of the work. As is usual for works of African art, the name of the people who produced the piece or to whom it can be attributed serves doubly as a style designation and as an identification of the group of origin.

This does not mean that each style and type is a hermetically sealed unit, differing from all others in form and meaning. Africans did travel and come to know neighboring peoples, at times peacefully, at times during warfare. The rigid concept of tribal styles, each discrete, each unique, and to all intents and purposes ending at the group's borders, is very much an oversimplification.

As peoples interacted with one another, art forms were exchanged, copied, or adapted.

Yet there remain discrete styles that can be identified with particular groups of people, and the names of those peoples are still the best style designators that we have. Thus Akan is a term that can be applied to the works of all Twi speakers, even though the styles of different groups of Akan, such as the Baule of Côte d'Ivoire (cat. no. 26) and the Asante of Ghana (cat. no. 6), have been identified. From their oral histories we know that they are historically related.

The Yoruba of southeastern Nigeria never considered themselves a single ethnic unit before the arrival of the Europeans, but now they are spoken of as a single large group with a number of subgroups and having an overall Yoruba style and recognizable substyles. The names of the ethnic groups used in this catalogue are generally accepted, even though they reveal their origins in tribal designations. It must be noted that the term *tribe*, long used by anthropologists and art historians, has in recent years taken on the pejorative connotation of "tribalism," which is suspect because it is in opposition to the sense of polyethnic nationalism that is stressed in the new African nations. Instead, the terms *people* and *peoples* will be used to refer to the cultures or groups that are discussed. The characteristics of a people are very much like the characteristics in the old definition of a tribe, that is, they have their own language, occupy a particular geographical region, and share a common culture with its distinctive social, political, and religious systems. Normally a person must be born into the group to be a member (Mbiti 1969, 100-104). It should be added that for the most part the members of each group share an art style. Thus, as has been noted, the name of the people, for example, Dogon or Pende, identifies both a culture and an art style.

Depending too heavily on the concept of "one people, one style" is, however, somewhat deceiving on two counts. First, some peoples support more than one style. Among the Bamana, for example, different styles are evident when the solid rounded forms of the maternity figure (cat. no. 5) are contrasted with the more two-dimensional, tracerylike forms of the antelope head-dresses (cat. no. 22). A second possibility is that a style may be shared across cultural boundaries; for example, the Asante stool-carving style (cat. no. 43) is shared by a number of neighboring groups who experienced the military and economic influence of the Asante. Thus it is clear that too heavy a dependence on the concept of group styles will lead to a serious misrepresentation of

African art styles. René Bravmann, in an important essay and catalogue, *Open Frontiers*, has written, "Certainly one of the most glaring distortions that has affected the notions and writings of those who have concerned themselves with the arts of Africa . . . is the concept of the tribe as a closed artistic entity" (1973, 9).

William Bascom had earlier warned of the pitfalls of the concept of tribal styles in a paper presented in 1962 but not published until 1969 (1969c, 98-119). He acknowledges the usefulness at one level of ethnic or tribal styles, each of which is the end product of a particular history of development. At the same time, he refers to the diversity of styles within a single group and notes the necessity for refining that concept in two directions: first, the recognition of substyles and individual styles within the group style and, second, the acknowledgment of suprastyles, of larger-than-tribal styles, such as regional styles. Further, he recognizes the existence of "blurred" styles, the borrowings of foreign style elements that affect the group style, and the rare appearance of archaisms or revivals (ibid., 102-6).

The cautions of Bravmann and Bascom are very important. Yet the concept of naming the style for the people responsible for its appearance seems useful as long as the possibilities of substyles and individual artists' styles are acknowledged and as long as cultural contacts and suprastyles are recognized where they occur.

Further, to confuse the issue, the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, which divided much of Africa among European colonial powers, did so in ignorance of the geographical regions occupied by particular peoples. Thus many peoples were split by arbitrary colonial boundaries, which, with independence, became fixed national borders, often causing problems that are still not solved today.

Artists

The artists who produced these works, if we can judge from recent times, were mostly male. Indeed, only males are reported to carve figurative sculpture in wood or ivory or to work metals. They are part-time specialists, smiths, or agriculturalists who carve, cast, or forge. Among some peoples, for example, the Bamana in Mali, the blacksmiths are a people apart from the agriculturist core of the society. The men are ritual specialists who work iron and sculpt wood for the farmers; their wives are potters. Farther south and east, this castelike separation is not evident; rather, specialization is taught by apprenticeship and is not necessarily a family affair, and some sculptors are self-taught. But it is only rarely that a

sculptor achieves sufficient recognition or enough commissions to become a full-time artist.

The artist is not a passive copiest, even though one of his major responsibilities is to replace destroyed works; in this fashion he is his generation's link with the past. Inventiveness is recognized and rewarded as long as it holds to the outlines of traditional form and style, that is, if it meets the expectancies of the audience. One artist, Namni, introduced in the 1930s a major change in the sculptural figure style of his people, the Montol of northern Nigeria. From a loose tradition of simplified and abstract forms, he developed a more naturalistic and detailed image of the human figure. His innovation was not only accepted, but he became quite famous and much copied. One owner of a piece by Namni said he had traveled many miles and waited several weeks to commission a figure carving. Thus an artist might introduce significant changes in the sculptural style of a people and, indeed, create a form that would be copied and become the norm.

Because of the impermanence of wood carving, it is impossible to guess either how often and to what degree individual genius has affected the development of the styles and forms of African sculpture as we know it or how long a style has persisted. From one instance it seems clear that the basic Yoruba style has not changed significantly since the mid-seventeenth century. A divination board (cat. no. 30) that was collected before 1659 is in form and style similar to works produced during the past hundred years.

It is clear that some styles have been more fixed and unchanging than others. In terms of these two examples, one Montol and one Yoruba, it is probably significant that the Yoruba are a large, centralized people with a strong emphasis on ceremonialism, whereas the Montol are a much smaller, less structured, and less centralized group. In the former the style, once fixed, would probably tend to be sustained with minor variations, while in the latter there would seem to be less insistence on prototypes and therefore possibly greater freedom for change.

Sculptors rarely produce objects except on commission from a patron. The product is discussed by the artist and client and the price agreed upon before the sculptor sets to work. The client quite confidently expects the artist to produce a familiar form in a familiar style. For the client it is the object, not the producer, that is important. Warren d'Azevedo reports on the Gola of Liberia that

craftsmen and performers were persons of low status who provided services for those who could afford them. The finest work from such persons became the property of wealthy patrons who used them to enhance their own prestige. When one admired the work of a singer, a musician, or woodcarver, one was usually informed of the name of the patron as though the identity of the actual producer was insignificant. (1973a, 332)

In contrast, Gola artists themselves have a high view of their work. They believe in a guardian spirit or muse that helps them to conceive and execute their works. There is an "intensive focus on self-conscious rationalization" of their role and the quality of their productions (ibid., 324). At the same time, the artist is conceived of by the "normal" members of society as aberrant, "the kind of individual whose behavior is strange—irresponsible yet marvelous, dangerous yet attractive, and childish though wise" (ibid., 323). For one thing, the male Gola artist carves masks for both the men's Poro association and the women's Sande association. This is extremely unusual. Like most other African cultures, most aspects of Gola society are strongly divided by gender, but the Gola and their neighbors are exceptional in that women wear masks (cat. no. 18).

Thus in some African societies the artist either is outside the group that uses his products, as with the Bamana blacksmith, or, if he is a member of the society, is considered (along with the musician) to be of low status. What should be stressed is that a clear distinction is drawn between the artist and the objects or events he produces. Unlike the leader, who is highly regarded as are his acts, or the criminal, who has low status because of his actions, the artist is often regarded as a person of low status yet "produces objects or performs acts which are not only welcome in the society but which often, perhaps usually, reinforce the norms of that society" (Sieber 1973, 431). Thus the artist's aberrant behavior is tolerated because of the importance of his contribution to the society.

In some groups, such as the Akan, the wood-carvers (*duasenfoo*) "belong to a carvers' association whose head is known as the chief (*ohene*) of the woodcarvers, the *Duasenfoohene*" (Warren and Andrews 1977, 11). Similarly, the metal casters of Benin belong to a guild.

It is necessary to counter the old assumption that the artist in African society is anonymous. It is clear that this is not the case among the Montol or the Gola. In fact, it is a fiction based on the failure of early collectors to ask the name of the artist when collecting specimens.

Along with other researchers, I have found that in many, if not most, cases the name of the sculptor of a particular piece is remembered by the owner and often by others. Thus African carvers are not the anonymous producers of passive copies but are the respected, if somewhat culturally aberrant, creators of works whose requirements of familiarity of style and form can be inventively modified by particularly talented artists.

Techniques

The working method of wood-carvers seems much the same over the subcontinent. They often work in secret, particularly in the production of objects relating to secret cult practices and masks, which, when worn, are said to be the spirit forces they represent.

It must be noted that wood carving, like stone and ivory carving, is a subtractive technique. That is, wood is removed to "reveal" the sculpture. Wood-carvers use axes, adzes, and knives, usually working from broad, generalized forms through an increasingly greater definition of forms to carefully finished final cuts. Thompson discusses the four "stages of the process of carving" of Bandele Areogun, a Yoruba artist from Osi-Ilorin: "1) the first blocking out, 2) the breaking of initial masses into smaller forms and masses, 3) the smoothing and shining of forms, 4) the cutting of details and fine points of embellishment into the polished surfaces of the prepared masses" (1973, 34). Other Yoruba artists describe the process somewhat differently (*ibid.*), but all work from the broad blocking to the fine finishing touches, a process also described by Marcel Griaule ([1938] 1963, 405ff, pl. XVII), who outlines the Dogon artist's working procedure from the required initial sacrifice to the spirit of the tree that furnishes the wood for the sculpture to the final application of colors (fig. 1). Colors are vegetable or mineral in nature and consist primarily of black, red, and white and occasionally yellow and blue. The blacks are from charcoal or river sediment; the reds from ochres, camwood, or *tukula* (the latter two from woods); the white usually from kaolin; the yellow from ochre; and the blue from indigo. In addition, many substances may be added to the basic wooden sculpture to enhance the aesthetic or meaning of the object: skins, fibers, beads, seeds, or metals.

In his discussion of the carving technique of the Dogon, Jean Laude suggests:

We can observe a process parallel to the method that in Dogon thought regulates the passage from the general to the particular. The sculptor gradually

releases an anthropomorphic image which becomes more and more particularized by means of conventional signs that, taken as a whole, constitute a repertoire (or a code), and convey a message. (1973, 43)

In contrast to the subtractive technique of wood carving, modeling in clay and wax is an additive technique. Working in wax is essential to the technique of metal casting, for example, the lost-wax castings from Benin (cat. nos. 45-46). A clay core, roughly shaped to the form of the final product, is carefully covered with a thin layer of wax, into which are worked the final surface details of the finished sculpture. The whole is then encased in clay, which after drying is heated to allow the wax to melt and be removed, hence lost, leaving a hollow where it had been. That hollow is then filled with molten metal, usually a copper alloy, most often brass. After cooling, the clay investment is removed, and the sculpture is revealed. Traditionally no files or burins were used; there was no chasing of the metal after casting. What one sees is what had been modeled or incised in the wax.

Religion

Mbiti, an African scholar, states that "Africans are notoriously religious" (1969, 1). Indeed, much of what we consider social, political, or cultural and thereby secular is considered religious in African thought. "The whole organization of society is maintained by the spiritual forces that pervade it" (Parrinder 1954, 27). The pervasiveness of religion involves all aspects of the culture: kinship; health and disease; fertility of crops, animals, and men; leadership; and war. It offers a general sense of security and well-being. "For Africans, the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe" (Mbiti 1969, 15).

There is belief in the hierarchy of spirit forces. First, there is God, who is seen to be "in and behind . . . objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest Him, they symbolize His being and presence . . . The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks of the other, and African peoples 'see' that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world" (*ibid.*, 57).

God is conceived of as a distant, relatively unapproachable deity. "The great Creator has very few temples or images, but is almost everywhere believed in" (Parrinder 1954, 16). Ordinarily there is little direct contact between man and the supreme deity. "The gen-

eral picture in Africa is that regular communal prayers to God are rare" (ibid., 39). However, "in times of great distress many Africans turn to God in desperation. He is the final resort, the last court of appeal" (ibid., 24).

Below God are the spirits, which Mbiti describes as invisible, ubiquitous, and unpredictable. They live all around: in the sky, the sun, the earth, bodies of water, rocks, or trees (Mbiti 1969, 75ff).

"There are spirits of mountains and forests, of pools and streams, of trees and other local objects" (Parrinder 1954, 43). In addition to the beliefs in the spirits of geological formations and vegetation, there are spirits of animals, storms, thunder and lightning, and household spirits. Men's and women's associations "have their own presiding spirits, crafts have their particular gods, villages have their guardians" (ibid., 53). The spirits can be protectors or they can bring illness or madness, particularly if they have been neglected or angered through the breaking of taboos.

A special category of spirits is the living-dead, the recent ancestors, still remembered, who can intercede with other spirits or even God for the good of the living (Mbiti 1969, 75-83). Thus although Africans may believe in a high God from whom all mystical power flows, it is through the spirits, including the ancestors, that man is able to make contact with the deity to tap that mystical power. "That means that the universe is not static or 'dead': it is a dynamic 'living' and powerful universe" (ibid., 203).

Nature is not conceived of as impersonal but is "filled with religious significance. Man gives life even where natural objects and phenomena have no biological life" (ibid., 56). Since this spirit power is manifested in all things, the term *animism*, the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena, has been applied to these beliefs. Africans thereby are described as being animists. The term is, however, inadequate and somewhat denigrating, for it oversimplifies the rich texture and the complexity of African religion. To the African this mystical power is potentially both good and bad. It can be used "for curative, protective, productive and preventative purposes" (ibid., 203), which may take forms ranging from broadly shared rituals to personal amulets. "The spiritual powers are ranked in hierarchies and approached according to need. Magical charms are made for teething troubles, ancestors are consulted over land disputes, sky gods are prayed to for rain, above all is the great Creator. All these powers are important, and in turn they may help man in his incessant fight against disease, drought or witchcraft" (Parrinder 1954, 26).

Such uses ensure a secure, healthful, and fruitful life for the individual or the group; obviously this is power put to positive, social use.

There is also a negative side to the use of spiritual power. "It is used to 'eat' away the health and souls of victims, to attack people, to cause misfortunes and make life uncomfortable" (Mbiti 1969, 203). The term *witchcraft* is usually applied to this antisocial use of mystical power.

But the essential point is that although this power can be used secretly for evil purposes, it is believed to be best and most profitably used for the good of the group. Thus African societies tend to use it openly, publicly, for the general well-being. The mask from the area of Bondoukou (cat. no. 29) is an example of a type of mask whose descendants harness spiritual power to purify and cleanse the village and its inhabitants of malevolent forces.

The workers-of-evil, those "who employ that power for anti-social and harmful activities" (ibid.), are called witches or sorcerers; the workers-of-good are called doctors, priests, diviners, shamans, or medicine men. At times the latter are referred to as witch doctors, which is confusing because they seek out and destroy witches and thus are antiwitch doctors, or, as Parrinder notes, "witch-doctors are what the name literally says, doctors of those who have been bewitched" (1954, 108). In reality, they "are the friends, pastors, psychiatrists and doctors of traditional African villages or communities" (Mbiti 1969, 171). The methods they use include divination, exorcism, and herbalism.

In order to heal, it is first necessary to know the cause of the disease. African diagnosticians must discover, often through divination, if the problem is natural or supernatural (cat. nos. 30-31, 34). Only if the cause is determined to be "natural" is the herbalist called in or, more recently, is the patient taken to a Western type of hospital.

Traditional treatment includes such medicines as purgatives, emetics, poultices, ointments, sweating baths, and bloodletting (Parrinder 1954, 106). Further, among some groups specialists exist, such as the doctor who treats poisonous snake bites among the Goemai of northern Nigeria or the Yoruba cult in southeastern Nigeria that both treated and inoculated against smallpox even before Western vaccination was introduced.

If the cause of illness is divined to be supernatural, then the spiritual powers at the command of the doctor are brought to bear to drive out or appease the causative agent. If it is a spirit or ancestor who has been slighted,

sacrifices and prayers, often addressed to a sculptured figure, will redress the situation. If the cause is witchcraft, then spells against the evildoer are necessary, or the object that is believed to cause the illness by being willed into the victim can be physically removed from the patient.

In working with the spirit forces, it is often necessary to observe certain controls or restrictions, such as the prohibition of sexual intercourse or the avoidance of certain foods. These taboos are necessary to ensure the ritual cleanliness of the doctor and the patient before approaching the deity. Similar restrictions may be observed before major rituals.

It is important to note that the "medicine-man or diviner is a respected figure in village life, he is consulted by nearly everyone and is well in the public eye" (ibid., 117). In contrast, the "sorcerer or wizard . . . is an evil person, feared and hated. He works in darkness because his deeds are evil" (ibid.).

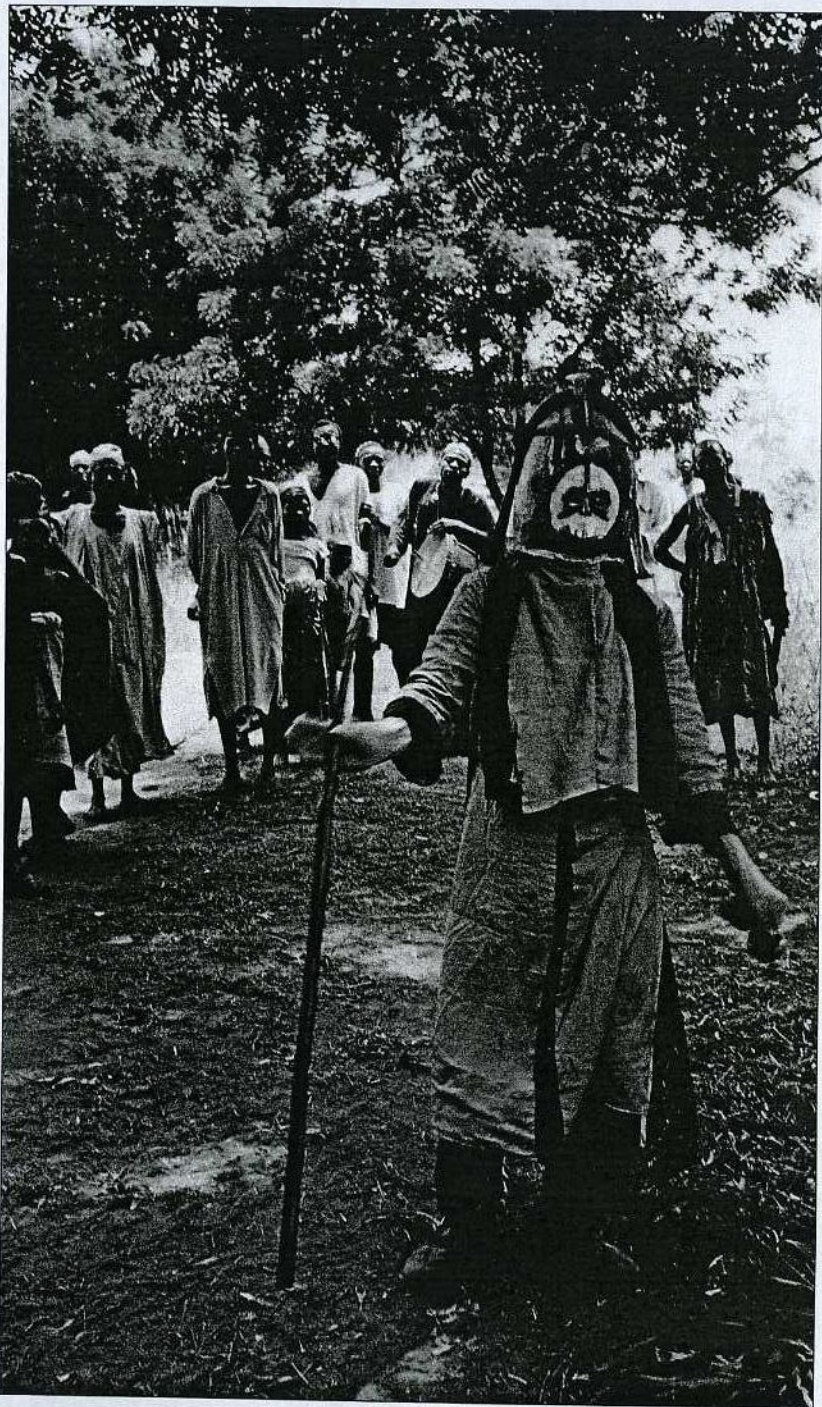
What is most important to realize is that the spirit world, ranging from God to nature spirits and ancestors, can to some degree be manipulated. Many of the objects in this exhibition are concerned with the maintenance of the spiritual well-being and stability of the individual and the group.

What may appear, when viewed from a Western bias, as strange, possibly even grotesque beliefs and art forms will become comprehensible if viewed in the setting of the cultures that gave rise to them. Then the arts will be seen as expressive of the imaginative reach and aesthetic inventiveness of the parent culture. Those beliefs and the art forms must be approached scientifically, empathetically, and aesthetically if we are to attempt to grasp their significance.

Use

An object may have a number of uses and reflect a number of meanings. In the object's original setting, the uses and meanings would have been familiar and therefore comprehensible to the traditional audience. However, in a museum the object has been removed from its cultural setting. Indeed, at times only a portion of the complete form has been preserved, for example, a mask without its costume. Yet, to understand the objects it is necessary

FIG. 4. Janus-faced Egu Orumamu mask, carved by Ada, Okpo village, Nigeria, c. 1943. Egu Orumamu is the chief of the Igala masks and serves as a symbol of authority and social control.



to know something of the setting. If it is not possible to retrieve the full complex of associations, the music, dance, myths, and beliefs that surrounded the objects, it may be possible to interpret something of their meaning and place in traditional African culture. At times the "objects" involved in ritual acts are ephemeral and cannot be preserved as "art." For example, at Prampram in southeastern Ghana a spring festival that is celebrated to ensure the coming of the rains and the success of the crops includes the production of "paintings" on the ground at all of the roads and paths leading to the farms. They are made of millet gruel, millet flour, and water (figs. 2-3). They symbolize the tilling of the soil (the four vertical strokes), the end product of a successful harvest (the millet flour and gruel), and the rains necessary for the successful harvest. These "products," which are a small part of a long ceremony, exist for only a few moments. By the end of the ceremony the water has dried, the flour has blown away, and the spectators at the ceremony have walked on them, obliterating them. As "objects" they have no significance, but as events they are a vital but ephemeral part of the call to the spirits for rain and agricultural success.

In many ceremonies the portion that survives—the sculpture, for instance—is but a small part of the full ceremony. At the same time, it may serve more than a transitory purpose in its own culture.

Ritual acts and utterances may be experienced as ephemeral, even though their effects endure. Ritual objects, in contrast, provide a sustained physical presence, a constant tangible reminder of the rituals of which they have formed and will again form a part. They serve not only as a reminder but also as a stimulus, focus, affirmation, guide, and resource for ritual activity. They are activated by ritual acts and utterances, at the same time that they possess a power of their own. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1982, 145)

It should be stressed that objects in a ritual setting are not passive symbols but rather, as Geoffrey Parrinder puts it, "symbols that men use, masks, colours, numbers, names, metaphors, all link up with the energy in the desired object; they are not dead symbols" (1954, 26). For objects that have been removed from their settings, from what Victor Turner has called the "resonant ambience of celebration" (1982b, 16), it is necessary in this exhibition to try to offer some explanation of the richness of the roles of those objects in their original setting. To attempt to achieve this, recurrent events or rites in the life of the individual and in the society have

been chosen to explicate the sculptures that were, at least in part, dedicated to them or used in the celebration of those rites.

Rites of Passage

It has been remarked that only humans acknowledge both time and changes. "The day, the month, the year, one's life time or human history, are all divided up or reckoned according to their specific events, for it is these that make them meaningful" (Mbiti 1969, 19). This marking of events is often done through rituals that set mankind apart, for "nothing remotely resembling a ritual marking transition from one life status to another has ever been seen among nonhuman beings. On the other hand no reliable observer has ever described a human society that did not have some ceremonial ways of marking such traditions" (Fried and Fried 1980, 13).

Early in the twentieth century, almost at the same moment that African art was being "discovered" in Germany and France, there was in the air another sense of discovery. It was the recognition that there exists a pattern to the human life cycle as it was marked and celebrated particularly in the so-called primitive societies. The idea of a cultural marking of transitions from one phase of life to another appeared in the writings of Robert Hertz in 1907-9 and Hutton Webster and Arnold van Gennep in 1908. Some were relatively isolated observations, as Hertz's ideas of transition relating to death. However, he did note, "societies . . . conceive the life of a man as a succession of heterogeneous and well-defined phases, to each of which corresponds a more or less organized social class" ([1907-9] 1960, 81). He also referred to "the passage from one group to another" (*ibid.*). Webster recognized the cross-cultural similarity of such transactions:

Though varying endlessly in detail, their leading characteristics reproduce themselves with substantial uniformity among many different peoples and in widely separated areas of the world. The initiation by the tribal elders of the young men of the tribe, their rigid exclusion . . . from the women and children; their subjection to certain ordeals and to rites designed to change their entire nature; the utilization of this period of confinement to convey to the novices a knowledge of tribal traditions and customs; and finally, the inculcating of . . . habits of respect and obedience to the older men. ([1908] 1932, 32)

It was, however, in a small book, *Les rites de passage* ([1908]; English translation, 1960), that van Gennep presented a more complete view of the similarity of the cultural activities that accompany transitions in the lives

of human beings—transitions ranging from birth to death. Barbara Meyerhoff has suggested that all rites of passage have, as a subtext, the “interplay of biology and culture” (1982, 109).

Turner has noted that rites of passage are “found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than technological innovations” (1967, 93).

Van Gennep in his formulation referred particularly to biological and sociological change:

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupation groups, progression from one group to the next is accomplished by specialists, like those which make up apprenticeship in our trades. [Please recall that this was published in 1908.] Among semicivilized peoples such acts are enveloped in ceremonies, since to the semicivilized mind no act is entirely free of the sacred. In such societies every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between the sacred and the profane. ([1908] 1960, 2–3)

Thus he argues that human life becomes

a succession of such stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. (ibid., 3)

Many of these events and their attendant ceremonies have works of art of one sort or another associated with them. These events, these rites of passage, may be divided into phases, which have been termed rites of separation, transition, and incorporation: separation from a previous condition; transition, which may include instruction away from the community; and reincorporation into the community in the new condition (Turner 1982b, 25). A boy thus goes through three phases to become a man: first, he is separated from his mother and sisters; second, he is secluded in a place where he is submitted to certain ordeals, perhaps including circumcision, and taught the “secrets” of the men; and, third, he is reintroduced into society as an adult. The symbolism of death and rebirth is frequently found in rites of passage: the death of the initiate in a previous stage and his rebirth in the new stage (Turner 1967, 72).

Of the three phases, the first is a separation “that clearly demarcates sacred space-time from mundane space-time. Sometimes violent acts (circumcision, knocking out teeth, shaving hair, animal sacrifice) betoken the ‘death’ of the novice” (Turner and Turner, 1982, 202). The third phase “represents the return of the novice to society, and the desecralization of the entire situation. Symbols of birth or renewal are frequently displayed in reaggregation rites, which constitute a festive celebration, a triumph of order and vitality over death and indeterminacy” (ibid.).

Between these two stages—separation and reincorporation—there occurs a stage somewhat more difficult to describe. It is the “liminal stage, a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo. . . . In liminality the novice enters a ritual time and space that are betwixt and between those ordered by the categories of past and future mundane social existence” (ibid.). During this phase, the Turners point out that there are three aspects to liminality: the presentation of sacred things, which may be symbolic objects, including sculptures and actions or myths; the play aspect with the use of masks and costumes; and the “fostering of *communitas*,” a “direct, spontaneous and egalitarian mode of social relationship” (ibid.). It is during this middle stage that instruction in responsibilities and secrets is undertaken. The three stages—separation, transition, and reincorporation—are characteristic of most biological and social changes in the status of the individual.

Van Gennep adds another category to biological and social changes: celestial changes. It can be argued that festivals celebrating changes in the seasons, such as planting and harvest festivals, are quite different from rites that are “responses to the crises of the transitional events of life like birth, death, marriage, initiation or physically moving on” (Abrahams 1982, 167). Seasonal rites tend to be repetitive, not transitional: one enters and leaves the ceremonies without a change of status.

Further, there are times of crisis such as infertility, illness, witchcraft, war, or drought that call forth rituals. When the calendrical, repetitive festivals are combined with crisis rituals and rites of passage, they all become part of the cycle of life, and art objects associated with them can be considered appropriate to this exhibition.

Conclusion

It is dangerous to try in as brief a fashion as this to generalize on the cultural traits and beliefs that gave rise to specific objects. The danger of oversimplification is

great in a subcontinent as large as Africa south of the Sahara with its many different groups speaking different languages. Thus it must be assumed that each object serves a particular purpose among a particular people. From the outside we might discern other objects from other groups that seem to serve similar or analogous purposes, and we can try, as we have tried here, to cluster them according to what seem to be larger, shared categories. Yet no two objects from different groups are entirely alike in use or style. Each is the product of a particular culture and must in the end be acknowledged in its uniqueness.

Sculptures often, perhaps usually, serve more than one purpose. A mask I observed in 1958 among the Igala of Nigeria may be used as an example (fig. 4). Egu Orumamu, the most important of the masks or spirits, serves as the symbol of authority for the chief and the elders. Its power derives from the spirits of the ancestors. It appears twice a year, at the times of planting and harvest, petitioning for a successful food supply, for the Igala are subsistence agriculturalists like most sculpture-producing peoples in Africa. Egu Orumamu also serves as a major symbol of social control: civil and criminal cases are brought before it for adjudication. Secondary masqueraders, whose masks and costumes are of painted, beaten barkcloth, carry out the edicts of Egu Orumamu, which include punishing offenders, collecting debts for the market women, or guarding the village water supply in the dry season. Murder is for the Igala the most serious crime of all; Egu Orumamu will demand that the family or village of the murderer seek out and give up the criminal. The village or family compound can be quarantined, cut off from the rest of society, and no one allowed to enter or leave until the murderer is apprehended. This is not an idle gesture, for it implies economic disaster: farms cannot be tended; water from the communal village source cannot be fetched; wood for cooking fires cannot be collected; and there can be no hunting. In short, all subsistence and communal activity comes to a halt; the group is effectively cut off from the rest of society until it has identified and surrendered the criminal. After the murderer is apprehended—and I was assured that this process never has failed—he is executed by a relative of the victim. This mask serves—even for Africa—in a large number of contexts: basic survival, several judicial functions, and peacekeeping. Thus it gives to the community a broad sense of security (Sieber 1961, n.p.). The elders who showed me the mask and told me of its meaning were excited by its abilities and activities. It is the epit-

ome of security, of social order for the group in an immediate, active, and practical sense. It is not an inert symbol of well-being.

Many of the objects in this exhibition also served more than one end, yet they have been selected and arranged rather arbitrarily as if they had but one primary area of use or meaning. Where possible, the descriptions for individual works will give some hint of the broader meaning of the sculpture while, at the same time, attempting to justify its inclusion in a particular section.

Now, there is no reason to believe that all Africans think of life as a cycle; that is an imposed concept into which can be fitted the various aspects of African life. The concept of cycles is meant to suggest that most peoples in Africa and, indeed, in the world share the same approximate sequence of events and activities, from birth to death. Not all cultures treat all of these activities in the same way, nor with the same intensity or emphasis. Yet in sub-Saharan Africa many peoples use sculpture to mark the events or stages of life.

Seven broad categories have been identified for the exhibition and this catalogue, each referring to an aspect of the cycle of life. Each is illustrated with examples drawn from widely separate African styles and cultures. The examples given are only samples of the many works that could have been included in each category. The categories include "Continuity," art associated with the assurance of the future through human reproduction; "Transition," art in the move from childhood to adult status; "Toward a Secure World," art in the service of adult activities that ensure the well-being of the group and the individual; "Governance," art in the expression of leadership; "Status and Display," art that reflects the cultural role of the owner; "Imports," art that expresses the impact of foreigners on traditional life; and "Departure," art associated with death and the ancestors.

To select only eighty-eight objects, the limit imposed by the exhibition space, to represent the full richness in the form and meaning of African sculpture is a goal impossible to achieve. What we have done is to select works that, in our view, meet several criteria. First, they must conform to the form and style expectancies of the culture that produced them as these are expressed in collections, published examples, and data collected in the field. That is, the work must be central to the form or type and to the style of the group that supported its production. Further, from field evidence or from evidence in the object itself, for example, the patination (signs of handling and care), the piece must have been used in the culture of origin. This establishes two points:

first, that by its use we know that it was acceptable in form and style and, second, that it met at least an aesthetic minimum, that is, it was not considered too crude or typologically or stylistically abnormal to be accepted. Further, any information about the status of the owner is useful. Thus a piece known to have been made for a leader may be expected to express an aesthetic high point for the group (cat. nos. 9, 45). An old piece, well handled, was probably admired (cat. no. 10); also, a work that can be tested and shown to have been long preserved would reflect the esteem of generations of owners (cat. no. 5).

Because we almost never have aesthetic evaluations from the people who made and used the works, it is almost invariably necessary to infer the opinion of the work held by its original owners. Admittedly, such are informed guesses at best.

In addition we must know, with some certainty, the role of the piece in its parent culture. This evidence comes almost totally from field research. The meaning of a work of art is contained in its form and subject matter, but it is accessible only from information from its original users. There is no doubt that it is necessary to learn to become adept at understanding the iconography of Western art. After all, there is no inevitable association, no natural basis upon which a lamb can be equated with Christ or a naked woman with truth. Similarly, it is necessary to learn the associations of form and meaning in African art. Just as there is no "reasonable" basis for assigned meanings in the West, there is no "reasonable" basis for us innately to grasp the meaning of African sculpture.

The object should also fit a historical sequence where one is known. Because little is known except for the very recent history of objects, we have to depend on pieces collected relatively early—say, the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century—to serve as a historical baseline. The absence of signs of recently introduced techniques or materials—saw marks, nails, or European paint in wood carvings; or file marks, aluminum, or certain types of brass in cast metal objects—are useful but

not infallible signs of age. Works that survive longer than wood, particularly works in cast metals or fired clay, can often be placed historically either by dating them archaeologically (cat. no. 72) or by analyzing them stylistically (cat. no. 46).

Finally, after determining the centrality of styles and forms of a work of African sculpture, after determining that it was accepted and used in its own culture, and after determining its meaning, then and only then should we apply contemporary Western aesthetic judgments to the work. In brief, if the arts of Africa are to be treated as culturally, historically, and contextually valid, serious attention must be given to nonaesthetic considerations. This of course is in sharp contrast to the original approach to African sculpture by the artists and critics of France and Germany in the early years of the twentieth century. Their approach and appreciation was essentially aesthetic, for African and Oceanic art seemed to offer them viable alternatives to what they considered to be outworn Western concerns with classicism and naturalism.

Much of art history has lost touch with the intensity of the cultural reality that works of art once possessed. Instead, the focus is often on the life of the forms or styles as if they existed independently of the cultures that gave rise to them, cultures that in fact supported the creators and used the objects, not as isolates, but as functioning parts of a cultural whole. The study of art is neither one, the study of contexts, nor the other, the study of forms and styles, but a continuum that reaches from the cultural context in its historical setting through the forms and styles so that the aesthetics of the maker can become comprehensible to a viewer of another culture.

It is to be hoped that the exhibition and this catalogue may offer a window on the complex forms and diverse styles of the sculpture of sub-Saharan Africa. By focusing primarily on the cultural setting for the sculptures, the richness of their uses and meaning will become understandable, and the link between the contextual and expressive aspects will become accessible to the viewer.

National Museum of African Art

**AFRICAN
ART IN
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Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker

(1982)

Published for the National Museum of African Art
by the Smithsonian Institution Press

Washington, D.C., and London