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Aspects of African Art for the Museums

by

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The purpose of this article is to show what manifold services Museums can render to the students of various fields by exhibiting their material from Africa with a proper purposeful presentation,—and at the same time encouraging the formation of African artworks for those museums who do not yet possess the appropriate material.

There are, however, two basic distinctions among the sculptural works originating from Africa. One is carved and cast objects which stem from a culture which was able to develop by its own indigenous forces without any direct foreign influence. The sculptures in this group were mostly used in religious, magical and social functions. Although we generally refer to them as “old” objects or “antiques”, this denomination refers only to objects “having the characteristics of bygone days”—to use the dictionary definition—as their age cannot be ascertained for lack of proper documentation. However, their stylistic features compared with a large number of “precedents” can easily help us recognize them as having originated from a well integrated African civilization.

Objects carved under European influence, including also copies of old carvings, or carvings and casts made for sale to the tourist trade or for export, have entirely different morphological characteristics. As we shall indicate shortly, they miss the emotional experience and we may say that they are works “done with the hand, but without the heart”.

We have to point out, however, that exceptions exist in this general classification. Up to the last ten years, in a few locations, probably due to isolation, very excellent carvings were still produced and used in religious and social organizations.

Most of the European and American museums have long ago collected objects stemming from the indigenous cultures. The main interest was centered around their ethnological and anthropological significance and for this reason, most of the collections all over the world are conserved in ethnological museums and not in museums of fine arts. The purpose was to show an evidence of the material culture of the African; how these objects were used in their life, should it be their religious life, social organization or daily usage.
It was only around the turn of the century that artists in Paris began to "re-discover" African art as a work of art of high artistic quality. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to devise a scientific method of measuring this all-important quality of an art object. It is generally up to the training and past experience of the onlooker to be able to develop such a sensitivity which will enable him to see, to perceive and to evaluate the difference between an artwork of greater or lesser quality. But, as a tentative criteria, we may advance that the artistic quality depends upon how deeply the creative artist felt an emotional experience and how successfully he expressed it with the proper coordination between the emotional content and its expression. Such objects will be able to "radiate" an emotionally moving quality and in turn we can capture this message and feel its effect. This consideration eliminates the question of whether the work is "beautiful" in the generally accepted sense and whether it is true to visual reality. It is on this level that the modern artist meets with the African.

Picasso said, speaking of cubistic works "... when the form is realized, it is there to live its own life." This plastic quality also makes African art able to live its own life in our civilization without any reference to its tribal origin. That means that, having an affinity with the African carvings, we can appreciate them, not because they come from Africa, but because their artistic realization is of such a high communicative quality. It also means that no matter how "fully realized" these forms would be—to refer again to Picasso's statement—they would be empty or decorative if they would not be "loaded" with emotional impact. This particular quality enables the work of art to convey to us the emotional experience under which it was created. Modern art, the same as African art, aims thus to express a conceptual reality, an inner world, and does not concern itself with how the subject matter looks. Thus both combine an emotional "content" with a non-naturalistic expressive "plastic language".

What is amazing in this observation is that the African did this type of artistic creation for many centuries and only in the last fifty years have we, in our own civilization, arrived at the very same style.

This new change of attitude towards works of art in general, has also changed the policies of many museums towards African sculpture. Although the ethnic study was still their main consideration, they began to organize special exhibitions. One might have aimed at showing the incredible diversity of tribal styles, and objects from over 200 major art producing areas from West and Central Africa might have been assembled from the French Sudan to Angola. Another point of view might have been to show objects of the highest quality in African art, without any consideration of background, but in such a case, the individual taste of the museum curator was often the only guiding measure. To bring out the artistic quality of the objects presented—very often a larger part having been borrowed from private collectors—special installations have been designed by contemporary artists, using special lighting effects and diversified colored backgrounds.

All these activities, with few exceptions, were carried out by ethnological museums. Today we may notice a new trend among college and university art galleries, especially in the United States, to establish their own collections of African art so that the student may have a first hand experience with the exhibited objects.

In hand with this newly developed interest for African art, a large number of richly illustrated books have been published on this subject so that the museum visitor is able to follow up his interest in the subject with more detailed studies.

Thus the already existing museum collections present abundant material
for the student in various fields of endeavor. In a summary fashion we shall enumerate the various aspects from which the study of African sculpture can be considered.

1. The ethnological and anthropological aspects are self-evident.
2. Recent excavations in Nigeria (Nok, Ife, etc.), in the Ivory Coast, in the Sahara regions have unearthed objects of highest artistic merit. Thus the archaeologist began to play an important role in the study of the background of African art, as the proper scientific evaluation of the grounds where the objects were found may give us the possibility of dating the objects and eventually permit us to trace in which manner migratory movements of peoples took place.
3. The study of mythologies from the psychoanalytical point of view acquired in the last two decades, is of special significance. We began to understand that they were symbolic expressions of basic human emotions. If we consider the very rich mythological material in Nigeria, which starts with the creation of the world; the deification of the natural forces, and related divine origin of the ruling dynasty, we find many sculptural works acquired their meaning only if they were related to this legendary oral tradition. The study of the Yoruba and related mythologies, for instance, enables us to identify an equestrian figure as representing Shango, the god of lightning, who is also considered to be the first legendary king of the Yoruba and to whom the present day Alafin (king) also traces his origin.
4. Art history books and courses began to pay greater attention than before to the so-called “primitive” arts from all over the world, and thus the African museum material became a valuable subject for the students of art history.
4a. In addition to general art history surveys, there are also studies which center their attention on the development of modern art. If the student would consider a mask, for instance, from the Gio tribe in Liberia used by the officers of the Poro society, he would find a wonderful application of what Cézanne called “spheres and cones” as forming the fundamental elements of plastic architecture of a picture. Here we have the basic principles of cubism; the interplay of round and angular shapes.
5. This consideration leads us to the next important interest of museums and educational institutions; to present to the student of creative art—“genuine” art, created through great artistic insight. This student whose main interest is to find for himself an appropriate “plastic” or “pictorial-language”—for his own artistic, creative activities, will find the most incredible richness in the plastic “inventions” of the African. For instance, he may see in a mask from the Dogon tribe of the French Sudan that, from simple square forms, the most amazing and strong plastic work can be created, and may evoke similarities with the work of Mondrian.
6. The student of comparative religion will find a great interest in the art works of the African. Sculptures for the African were “tools” employed to approach deities and genii of natural forces, and in the cult of the ancestors. In all civilizations all over the world, the use of masks had an abundant use in rituals created to satisfy the need for “transfiguration”. If the student would consider only the four major religious “rites de passages” he will find an abundant use of sculptures in each of them.
7. The student of social institutions will find that many African social activities developed into strong social forces although the majority of them were all more or less connected with religious concepts. The so-called “secret societies” having a strong social integrating function of admitting the male and female adolescent into the adult society, played a very important role.
8. In the various studies connected with the motivating forces of human activities,—i.e. the investigation of the creative act, the process of art appreciation, or the various religio-magical institutions of the African; these studies have to be traced to the psychological mechanism of the individual to understand them properly. Thus, in the last two decades, the psychoanalytic approach emerged as the most vital and valid point of view from which to study any and all of these processes. If we study from the psychoanalytic point of view the so-called “superstitions” of the African and their innumerable rituals, we arrive at understanding what a deep, empirical insight the African had to have to be able to invent, perpetuate and conserve these institutions which fulfilled basic psychological needs. Here again, the sculpture as a “concretization” of a wish, as a focal point of concentration, acquired a new significance.

8a. As a side-line we may mention also that in the study of what is known as the “art of the insane” valuable comparative material was found in the art activity of the non-literate people.

There are many other subjects of study in which the African material exhibited in the public collections may help the student. Due to space limitations, we may only indicate a few of them, without discussing their implications:

Study of children’s drawings; study of medical objects used in magical healing; masks and puppets used in secular plays, for the student of the theatre; masks used in dances with special interest to the choreography student. The great affinity which African carvings showed to Modern art, became of great interest to modern interior decorators who use them abundantly in connection with functional design.

This summary presentation of the various interests which the museums can further, are only highlights of the subject. It aims to show only the great service which the museums can render to the various fields of studies. But a museum can only fulfill its function in its community if it cooperates with its own public. The leaders of the museums may “lead” with special exhibitions and presentations, but, in our opinion, it is necessary also to know what the public wants. The French museums started to create an association, called the “Friends of . . .” any particular museum. This cooperation may result in gaining friends to the museum. Some of them may become “patrons” and may be encouraged to extend their collecting activities and thus consider the donation of their collections to the museum. Members of such an association may come forth also with valuable suggestions so that the public museum may be better integrated with its own community, instead of standing—as is so often the case—as a rather remote institution.

Le Gérant : Louis Velay