

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# AFRICAN PAINTING

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**Overview** African painting is, like African theater and African music, regularly a component of other arts--as well as being an art in itself. (Traditional African theater is a blend of music and dance with theatrical narrative; traditional African music is typically an element in both dance and religious ceremony. The inseparability of the African companion arts, until modern times, makes the African artistic achievement unique.) Traditional African painting, from ancient rock painting through the masks and masquerades of relatively modern times, invariably appears in conjunction with dance, religious memorializing (as in shamanistic rock painting), or even, as in body painting, where the body is to play a role in festivals, with the body itself. It is not until our own time that the individual African painter emerges--in the now global fashion--as a private eye choosing a unique medium in which to express himself. But as we will intimate, even many contemporary African artists are taking their own stance *within* traditional African art.

## Ancient

The earliest painting remaining on the African continent dates (these dates are conjectural) from the middle of the sixth millennium B.C.E., and is to be found in the Tassili region of the northern Sahara, and in the Hoggar (in today's southern Algeria.) This rock painting, time-worn but often still vivid, is of a type which can be found millennia later in many parts of the African continent--among Namibians, Bushmen and throughout East Africa, as well as in the northwest--but which, in the Sahara, preserves images of life conditions and life styles, which distinctly span several millennia of human development, frequently providing us insights into flora and fauna, conflictual and pacific social situations, and historical political settings. Thus this kind of painting on rock, which flourishes as perhaps the first sustained recorded art, proves its capacity, through time, to reflect the desire to express. Telling samples can be found in numerous reproductions--my reference here is to the excellent brief book by Willetts, *African Art*, illustrations 27,29,30--which indicate the intangibility (ill. 27), historical continuity (ill. 29), and design freshness (ill. 30) of this archaic work. One would search these rock paintings in vain for the bold colors of later African painting, for millennia in sandy rock do much to bleach the vigor of ground rock.

## Early Modern/ Modern

Rock painting embraces a history which survives, in Africa, to our own time. The restoration of modern Sub Saharan art history is as difficult as the formation of a chronology of rock-painting styles and sequences. African art history, because Black Africans did not for the most part write their own history, was written for them by such as Ibn Battuta (14<sup>th</sup> century), who travelled widely through the Sahara and visited festival sites, say, in which dancing and masking events took place where 'poets' painted with 'ridiculous red beaks' appeared praising their ruler. There follow, in the centuries opened by the first Portuguese explorations of West Africa in the fifteenth century, discoveries of Africa as a source for plunder and excitement; one notes especially the ample travellers' descriptions of the Royal Court of Benin, but when it comes to identifiable paintings, from the early modern period, we find ourselves looking at the style developments of the mask and masquerade, regularly painted sculptural forms, which remain for us the most vivid centerpoint of African painting. The dating of the earliest preserved samples of this masking, with its painted forms, is as complex and tribe or clan-specific as you can imagine, for each mask is created to meet tribe-specific issues, the expulsion of demons, the promotion of fertility, the frightening of foes, or, say, the representation of beauty or ugliness for educational purposes within specific clans.

## 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: masks and culture

African masks, which form a history of sculpture as well as of painting, are of three kinds: 'those that are worn over the face, those worn on top of the head, and the 'helmet' type masks, which fit down over the head.' Our example here is the 'over the face mask.' To date or to interpret a particular painted tribal 'over the face mask,' in view of the (usual) absence of either written information or reference points outside the mask's history--like events indicated by the mask--involves comparison with other masks' style history or with reports--say by missionaries, or, later, anthropologists--concerning the movements, challenges, and values of the tribe. Such painted mask related

information as is made available, along the above avenues, will lead us to back interpret into the uses of a given mask. The painted masks illustrated in Willett, illustrations 172 and 173, have individual histories, both of which pertain to the activities of the Ekpe Society, in Cross Rivers State, Nigeria. This secret society, sacred (and still ceremonially existent) is designed to preserve and if needed placate the god-force of the founder Ekpe, who supervises and if needed punishes tribal ill doers. To appreciate/date the energy and weight of Willetts #172 is to work with tribal memory to recreate the inception of the Ekpe drama in the city of Onitsha, where (centuries earlier) the mask was initially used; the elephant spirit mask (#173) is a 'symbol of ugliness,' derives from the activities of the Aba Asa Clan in Owerri, and will have been created as an expressions of evil. Both of these marks (172, 173) are now in the Nigerian Museum in Lagos, but neither of these masks is truly *there*, for their authentic existence is in the inherited from-the-inside experience of their original use. The same can be said for the innumerable painted masks generated by sub-Saharan tribes for the length of the 'modern period.'

### Contemporary

African painting flourishes today, as the work of sophisticated mainstream Africans who have been trained in the west, or in non-African traditions, but who have continued to work along African thematic lines. One of the outstanding examples of this contribution is Bruce Onobrakbeya, an Urhobo painter who has slashed daring colors and strict designs across canvas and silk screen prints, and has proven himself a leader of the new African sense of color and design. Concurrently there is a vigorous African movement to promote the work of young African visual artists, including painters. In the 1970's Frank McEwen, Director of the National Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe, initiated this kind of movement 'by supplying painting materials to the art gallery attendants.' From this seat of the pants populist offering grew an upswell of young artists' work throughout Zimbabwe. Painting, among the other arts, has similarly prospered elsewhere in contemporary Africa, in the arts communities around Suzanne Wenger, in Ife and Ibadan, as well as around the National Art Gallery in Lagos, Nigeria, where young painters from regional polytechnics work through their own home grown powers of 'being African with your eyes.'

### Reading

Bascom, William, *African Art in Cultural Perspective*, New York, 1971.

Beier, H.U., *Art in Nigeria*, Cambridge, 1960.

Ezra, K., *Art of the Dogon: selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*, New York, 1988.

LaGamma, A., *Art and oracle: African art and rituals of divination*, New York, 2000.

Vogel, Susan; Ebong, Ima, eds. *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> century African Art*, New York, 1991.

Willett, Frank, *African Art*, New York, 1993,

### Discussion questions

What continuities do you see between ancient African rock painting and the themes and procedures of later African painting?

What was it, about African painting, that turned on those painters like Picasso and Derain, in early twentieth century Paris? How does Picasso process the African painterly and sculptural forms that fascinate him?

Will the intra-African effort, to inspire young Africans with the artistic powers of their heritage, prove successful? Will African painting remain distinctive, even as African culture yields by stages to 'globalism'?

What problems do you see in studying African painting or sculpture in the setting of a museum? Are any elements of the artistic experience lost, in that studying?

Do you suppose the traditional tribal mask maker expresses his 'unique personality' in his work? Or does he simply work inside inherited forms and the challenges they convey?

It is estimated that African rock painting has a history lasting over 30,000 years. What was the attraction of painting on rock? How durable a surface did rock present? What were the special advantages and limitations to painting on rock?