

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN SCULPTURE

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Overview ‘Indigenous African sculpture falls into three sorts: one is the figurine...the next form is the mask....the third form is decoration of various useful objects, ranging from doors to spoons to bobbins.’ All three of these sculptural types play out together, chronologically, from early Nok times (Nigeria) through to vibrant contemporary African sculptural movements. What we offer below is barely a set of notes on a vast set of traditions, which some believe are as vigorous, in the mid-twentieth century, as at any point in their development.

Ancient

The oldest African sculptures--with the exception of those from Egypt-- date from the Nok culture, the first discovered works of which were found in tin mines in Zaria State, Nigeria, and represent a tradition vital from roughly 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. These sculptures of humans and animals are often created in terra-cotta, and are often small, figurines of six to twelve inches. Brother to these works, and roughly contemporary with the second half of the Nok period, is the sculptural work of the capital Yoruba city of Ife, also frequently terra cotta. Of both these traditions it needs saying that on occasion they created totally unprecedented, almost life-sized terra cotta figures. The vitality of sub-Saharan sculpture, which thrives yet today, is inscribed in these earliest works, compelling instances of a shaping drive seemingly part of early humanity’s requirement to reflect on itself. (My references to actual works , here as in our entry on African painting, are to the excellent brief book by Willetts, *African Art*; one could hardly improve, for example, on the selection of plates-- illustrations 17-45 in Willett--representing Nok and Ife work.)

Early modern

The growing presence of the white western world, in West Africa, is heralded by the fifteenth century arrival of Portuguese traders and soldiers; sculptures from the Guinea coast in the 15th century depict stout Portuguese fighters, cast in bronze; Willett illustrations 53, 55. There are examples like ‘the Master of the Leopard Hunt’, in work done for the Royal Palace in Benin, which try out an African perspectivism that suggests the western eye (illustration 171.) We have traders’ purchase records indicating imports into Europe of curious carved ivory spoons from West Africa. We are at that point in a period of fervent, but largely undocumented, sculptural-mask activity, from within the bosom of tribes and clans whose rich achievements are still honored from within, by sculptors who to this date, several hundred years later, work in their traces. Illustrations overwhelm us at this point, for we are on the brink of a flooding of original and inimitable mask-creations whose well springs will be a final remark.

18th and 19th centuries

Willett’s book, as does any good study of African art, exposes the reader to slick well photographed images, to which we must ourselves add the turmoil and dust of the living art situation. Four illustrations from Willett drive benchmarks into the temporally loose fabric of the two centuries before us:

Illustration 162: Just over two feet tall, this black bronze Yoruba figure of Onile was (we think on evidence) made in the 18th century. It represents the female spirit of the earth--counterpart to the male Olorun. Found in a sacred Ogboni Society House, this figure was consecrated to the harmony of male and female--though how this awareness played out in its sculptor we have to guess. Bulging eyes and bulging breasts interweave with severe dignity. While the sculptors of African ‘masterworks’ are known for distinctive individual skills, they seldom put their feelings on the line.

Illustration 185: Ba Kuba mask, 16 inches tall, ‘worn at initiation rites to symbolize the culture hero Woot,’ and to be worn only by men of royal descent. While #162 concerned cosmic harmony, the present instance concerns royal legitimacy.

Illustration 160: BaBembe 10 inch wooden fetish figure with medicine hidden inside the trunk through a hole between the legs. Heavy formal scarring on the torso. When not in use, as a source of priestly 'powers,' this type of fetish would typically be emptied of its medicine--awaiting a new occasion and new power dose.

Illustration 153: Wooden figure, 18 inches tall, from a reliquary of Fang ancestors' bones. We view a statuette of an infantile ancestor, marks of physical maturity under the enlarged childlike head of a moustached and bearded man. Thus the Fang dwell on the intertwined power of the ages on an ancestral level.

The above samples illustrate four different worldview dealings, in four small figurines: cosmic male-female harmony; royal legitimacy; fetish medicine power; the dignity and infancy inherent in the ancestral.

Twentieth century So far from it being true, that African sculpture at its strongest belongs to an earlier period, pre colonial and subsistence based, there are reasons to question this easy perspective. Within the sculpture of the past century one sees evidence of new sculptural powers. The present surfing entry-maker reflects on a few examples: a mask carved in the early years of the 20th century, depicting a three toothed shamaness, medicine and sacrifices in her 'dishevelled' headdress, ancient power storming in her; the head of a wooden spoon, carved by the great Yoruba sculptor, Tompieme, and replicating his daughter to a tee; powerful carved wooden doors for the chapel of the Apostolic Delegation in Lagos, installed in 1965 as the work of Ben Enwonwu, the first western trained African artist to achieve international fame. All of this work is from the unslaked energies of the African haptic, deep in the blood, and flowing.

Wellsprings of African sculpture From close interviewing with distinguished mid-20th century African sculptors, interested critics have discerned the extraordinary instinctual strategies that go into high level work with the properties of wood. Sculpting continues to thrive in certain African families, and inside the family within apprenticeship lines. These inherited powers are undiminished in the post-industrial world, and in fact are currently profiting, as noted in our entry on African painting, from organized federal-level efforts to support new generations, in their rediscovery of ancestral gifts.

Reading

Ezra, K., *Royal Art of Benin: The Paris Collection*, New York, 1992.

LaGamma, Alisa, *Genesis: ideas of origin in African sculpture*, New York, 2003

McNaughton, Patrick, *The Mande Blacksmiths*, Bloomington, 1988.

Paulme, Denise, *African Sculpture*, London, 1962.

Rachewiltz, Boris de, *Introduction to African Art*, trans. Whigham, New York, 1966.

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

Discussion questions

Are the uses of carving and painting united in the making of the African mask? Is one or the other element dominant?

Is the original impulse to African sculpture religious? Is it relevant to know that for the African sculptor the very tree from which the sculptor's wood is taken is considered sacred?

Upon being questioned, whether they 'got a great feeling of joy from their work in sculpture,' various African artists replied 'absolutely not.' Is African sculpture about emotions and feelings?

What contributions has Islam, even with its reservations about portraying the organic, made to African sculpture? You may want to look into the traditions of the Nupe, in northern Nigeria.

Most of our references have been to Sub-Saharan sculpture. What about ancient Egyptian sculptures? Do you see a connection between those works and those of Sub-Saharan Africa?

Many works of African sculpture seem to conceal a humorous or funky tone. Do they in fact conceal such a tone? Or is it purely deceptive? Examples!