

# THE ART OF AFRICA: AN INTRODUCTION

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LET us not define art too precisely. Most simply it is a culmination of craftsmanship and stands rooted in its craft. It is the apotheosis of the applied cunning of the skilled artificer. A craft is ultimately derived from the raw materials available and the range and quality of the tools concerned. Obviously it is not a product of the materials; the alabaster does not produce the statue, but in skilled hands it can be shaped to something that existed only in the designing mind. The available material gives or withholds the opportunities, the artist is the man best able to grasp the opportunities offered.

A people's arts are the product of its craftsmen, the raw materials and the canalized inspiration provided by past tradition. This last arises from the materials, tools and craftsmen of earlier generations, intimately woven into the life of the people to create a 'taste' consisting of expected standards.

This relationship between crafts and resources is very evident in Africa, where two sharply contrasting environments have had an immense effect upon the ordinary utensils and common crafts of everyday life. The forest region of West Africa has given rise to the great woodcarvers of our continent. Here the obsessing need for using up great timbers felled to make forest-clearings has beguiled the West African into becoming a skilled woodworker. Storage receptacles, stamping blocks, manioc-graters, canoes and the simple scarf-joints, notches and cogs of house and roof building are all made with the simplest tools. The axe, the adze, a curved scraper and perhaps a chisel are used in conjunction with carefully controlled burning. The West African quickly acquires the habit of working in wood. He thinks in wood, he is obsessed by wood, and carving becomes a pastime. There is little reason to be surprised at an art arising. Inefficient tools used for essential services, like the limiting rules of a game, tend to evoke a lust for achievement and a friendly emulation between experts. The very inadequacy of the tools is a spur. Added to this is the almost

satisfying way in which termites habitually destroy all things made in wood. Man is permitted an unending hobby, an eternal variety, and a lasting skill that can be passed on.

The pattern is analogous to an insatiable passion for knitting, kept alive by inefficient laundering and the predatory habits of the moth. There is no repining, replacement is the immediate essential. Within the environment, everything that can be made of timber is so made; the heavier the timber used, the more satisfactorily can a field be cleared for tillage. The climate too is a help, high humidity ensures the even seasoning of wood without splitting, the tropical heat makes fuel unnecessary except for cooking and as charcoal for crafts. The masks and fetishes of tribal religion use up excess timber, and abundant opportunities for artistry result. The termite ensures that each generation shall carry on the tradition of skill.

Forming a great half circle enclosing this forest region, the zone of velds yields a contrasting pattern. This was the realm of the prehistoric artists of Africa. About the entire zone, from the Sudan—through Tanganyika—to the Cape, caves are painted or rocks decorated by ancient hunters and cattle-keepers. Even to-day cattle and game supply abundant animal tissues. Wood may be readily available, but generally as thin poles and withies cut from the bush. The cultivator finds ample space for his fields without clearing much heavy timber. The herder has no need for clearing. What wood-craftsmanship arises is limited to spear shafts, hoe handles, stamping mortars for grain, to a few milk pails and drums, and to small canoes. Even these tend to split as they dry out in the less humid atmosphere.

With no urge to woodcarving, little artistry has arisen and it seldom reaches great heights. More time and care are given to the preparation of skin and sinew, materials that do not lend themselves to great artistry. The neatly patterned suedes of the Transvaal Venda and the glorious tanned morocco leathers of the Sudan are examples of high craftsmanship often approaching true artistry.

Between these contrasting environments a belt of overlap can be discerned, varying in width, where either wood or leather can be used; but the choice of alternative materials lowers the level of skill, and the high standards of the more restricting environments are seldom reached.

Throughout both these contrasting environments, weaving

and pottery thrive, but here again marked differences can be observed. The basket-maker necessarily uses the materials ready to hand, raffia and palm leaf in the forests, grasses and reed in the velds. The appropriate techniques accentuate the contrast. Coiled basketry, checker, twill, drill and wicker weaves have their proper materials, and their own distributions follow naturally.

The loom has spread wherever suitable cordage is grown. Raffia is commonly woven and has allowed the development of the curious *velours de Kasai*, woven mats with pile and French knots as decoration. Where cotton can be grown or plucked from forest trees, a coarse cotton cloth is made on the horizontal band-loom or on the vertical woman's loom that makes a towel-like cloth. The Transvaal Venda bring cotton-weaving to the limits of the southern range of the plant.

Only in the *kente* cloths of Ashanti has weaving approached the level of an art, but the finely drawn gold threads belong to recent times, while the silk is unravelled from Arab trade-silk, probably originating in Persia or China.

Where the right trees occur, bark-cloth is made from the stripped inner bark. It varies from the coarse "sackcloth" of the baobab to fine soft textures from less widely distributed tropical trees. In Uganda many varieties of a single species are cultivated, and a tree will yield thirty or more cloths in its lifetime. Skilled darning of knot-holes with raffia gives a pleasant irregular pattern on the grey-brown barkcloth.

Pottery shows a different story. Environment cannot fairly be evoked as a primary influence. Outside major deserts potclay is readily obtainable everywhere, while fuel is nowhere so scarce as to make pottery uneconomic. It is more or less universal, but standards vary considerably. The level of pot-making in the veld zone is relatively invariable, but in the forest region two opposing factors seem to affect achievement. Both arise from the high standards of wood carving. On the one hand, where so much can be made in wood, there is a tendency to relegate pottery to the sphere of cooking. Simple pots, crocks and bowls make up the pattern of domestic utensils, as cooking can only be done in pottery. In marked contrast to this delf, certain tribes have raised potmaking to a simple art. Sexual rivalry has stepped in. The woman potter vies with the male woodcarver to produce and decorate curious and pleasant ceramics, coarse in texture but very attractive.

These vary from the precisely hand-turned (without a wheel) platters and the beaten-clay jars of West Africa to the more ornate imitations of wood carvings made by certain Congo tribes. This transfer of designs from one material to another has always given rise to new fields of artistry.

There are other factors involved in African metal-working. Within the mass of our continent, craftsmanship in iron is never great. Spear-heads, knife-blades, battle-axes, adze, hoe or axe-heads, coarse needles and awls are enough for most smiths. Where Hamitic or Arab influences have penetrated, there is marked improvement. The sword, wire, wrought sheet metal, fantastic wrought iron ceremonial axes and spears, imperial crowns of iron, great gates, 'Roman' armour, slave-chains and so on come into the picture. Distribution and a clear derivation from outside sources show these to have been recent intrusive advances. Chiefly patronage is important here. The ornate or difficult ironwork could only be made under patronage. Base metals could only be obtained through the chief in most areas. Gold (seldom venerated more than copper in Africa) also passed through the chiefly channel. All fine metal work was dedicated to him, such as advanced gold or bronze-casting.

A curious development occurred in Ashanti, where the little boxes and weights used for holding or weighing gold-dust were made of bronze. The boxes frequently show miniature Dutch sea-chests from the Dutch 'factory' established at Almina in the first half of the XVII Century. A thousand other delightful forms occur. The gold-weights follow a different theme. They are devoted to illustrating the famous Anansi stories, animal tales that have slipped from Africa into European literature through Aesop, Uncle Remus and other slave channels.

It is difficult to say much of the advanced terra-cottas that are being recovered from Nok near the edge of the Jos plateau in Northern Nigeria. Further south, a far more recent development is linked here and there (at Benin, Ife and in Ghana) with bronze casting. Fairly certainly the tin component of bronze came from the alluvial tin mines of the plateau, but there is no local link with bronze-casting apart from this. Analogous forms occur as far afield as Uganda.

Musical instruments can best be divided into two functional groups, personal and social. Throughout Africa the solitary traveller or the lone herdsman will have the solace of a sweet,

almost inaudible instrument, perhaps a *sansa* of metal tongues, a mouth-bow, a grass harp. These are his own products made within tribal tradition. Exotic forms are as foreign to him as a balalaika would be to a Highland Scot. In sharp contrast are the drums (war-drums, dancing-drums, signal-drums) and also the *marimba* or xylophone on which outstanding compositions have been composed—the only African instrument capable of sustaining a concerto. These are essentially social, and their proper playing involves immense physical activity, intense concentration and alertness, and a remarkably exacting training. They are professional instruments.

This brief survey provides the essential background to African art. In the articles that follow a variety of writers will give their personal views on individual aspects. We have touched lightly on certain climatic achievements and may safely leave fuller description to the experts. In each case it is essential to keep remembering the simple tools from which these arts have come and the curious striving towards perfection that their very limitations evoke.

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We can touch concisely upon some of the changes that are occurring as a result of contacts with an overwhelming wave of European and Islamic penetration. The two most obvious differences between African and European arts are the tools employed and the vastly different traditions involved in each. In both traditions the historical background of socio-religious patterns is all important. There is a great gulf fixed between Christian or Jewish tradition and the African background of ancestor worship, animism or polytheism. There is no bridge that can link the Mohammedan arabesques and handicrafts with the masks and fetishes of Africa. As Mohammedanism and later Christianity have spread into Africa, the inspiration and function of African art have disappeared. Art is no longer dedicated to the gods, the chief or the ancestors, yet it can find no place within these two exotic creeds.

In the Sudan, the African has turned his hand, under Islamic taskmasters, to leathercraft, beaten metalwork and other marketable crafts. Terra-cottas have seen their day, and this skill is being diverted to the making of the *aquamanile* for ceremonial washing. Islam with her stern system of apprenticeship is far in advance of Christianity here; for where Christianity has spread, little has been done to replace man's insistent demand

for some outlet through craftsmanship. Heathen gods have been destroyed by *auto-da-fé* public bonfires, or (far more wisely) encased in museums, where the function is immolated but the craftsmanship survives.

We permit our converts to make 'quickies'—useless African curios for tourist consumption, such as will not compete locally with trade imports. Trumpery wire or beadwork, horn birds or carved softwood figurines of game are produced without inspiration or pride, a prostitution of God's gifts to man. Cotton-weaving must not be permitted to compete with Manchester, Japan or India. Brass-casting belongs to Birmingham. Iron is the perquisite of the Ruhr, of Sheffield, Toledo or Sweden. The Irish potato-pot must replace pottery. The tradition of trade is immensely strong. As an African friend expressed it, "You have taken away our natural incentives, our hobbies, our crafts, our interests. You have given us trade exotics in return. We are, of course, duly grateful; but don't turn on us and call us lazy."

Here and there a missionary will 'recognize artistic ability'; but very seldom, as the dedicated craftsman avoids Christianity as inimical. In other than non-conformist hands, there is a true and natural outlet for artistry in the churches. *Kente* cloths can be woven into rich vestments. Sacred art and the sub-sacred gargoyles, cherubs and carvings that ornament our churches and choirstalls are demanding carvers in wood and stone. Too often the artist is shoe-horned into a Western frame. Too often an overdraped Black Maria is preferred to a lovely Black Madonna. The two traditions clash on physical levels where they might so readily meet on a spiritual plane. The White priest dominates the Black artist who, in turn, becomes self-conscious and timidly sophisticated.

To the African, humour is never incongruous in art. To the Christian, humour to-day is a sign of weakness or even of cynicism. In the African gamut of artistic expression, terror and stupefaction are permissible emotions; in the Christian faith, only meekness, reverence and awe are expressed. We have conveniently forgotten the great peasant tradition of our Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and architecture, the carvings on choirstalls and nodding-stools, the glorious exuberance of Gothic ornamentation. We neglect the joy of the final psalm.

Oddly enough, a frequent stumbling block lies in the topiary hair-styles proper to crispate Negro hair. Their immense

variety is feared and denounced as bizarre and ridiculous, unworthy of sacred art and better confined to unsteady bedside reading-lamps cut in ebony. In one Cape Town stained glass window, Saint Monica of Numidia appears disastrously as a European woman in traditional Jewish garb. Ecclesiastical decency must be preserved.

The old patronage of powerful chiefs has gone forever. The proudly reprobate chief is no longer a social focus, the sacred repository of ancestral lineage. He has risen to become a decent citizen and a political shuttlecock. There is no way to replace that patronage. The selection and nursing of real promise from a field of a hundred craftsmen is replaced by competitive examinations in a trade-school. The artisan is preferred to the artificer. As an Irish writer once expressed it, "The search for the good is the enemy of the best". Artistry that should take a year, a decade or a lifetime is compressed into the brief spell of profitable employment measured in terms of hours, or of output under a Mohammedan taskmaster.

Quite unreasonably, better tools destroy art as surely as they improve craftsmanship. An hour spent over a mortise and tenon is an hour lost to inspiration. The setting of a precision lathe nullifies the artist's eye for balanced beauty. Perfectionism kills personality as surely as a compass takes all vitality out of a circle. The tools have come. There is no going back. The mill-sawn timber can never again be an adzed beam cut by an unselfconscious artisan. The modern saw and plane are as foreign to Africa as they were to Christ the Carpenter. We cannot despise one without the other.

It is odd to visit an earthen crafthouse and to see the careful array of punches, chisels, burins, planes, drills and blades set carefully in series above an ebony worker's bench. He stands at his workbench to-day. His ebony is held in a carpenter's vice. His once useful feet are shod and are now merely used to balance the moving craftsman's weight. Pride in artistry has descended to the dignity of labour. But there is no going back.

The distribution of art is changing rapidly under the regime of better tools, not only in geographical terms, but within each society. In West Africa *sapele* wood (a mahogany) was the craftsman's material, while ebony and ivory were worked only under chiefly patronage, with tools capable of incising the harder textures. Of early ebony we know little. To-day ebony is the

craftman's wood, while *sapele* is an export timber.

In Kenya, where carving is a recent intrusion, 'quickies' of Kikuyu warriors greet the Africa-hungry tourist. In Zululand, wooden chains abound and head-ringed *indunas* cap ten thousand walking sticks of assegaiwood. In Bechuanaland, where the soft *mopipi* wood has supplied centuries of bowls and milk-jugs, the steel blade has created a tourist market in smaller, harder timber. Wooden spoons, figurines of women, birds, baboons, giraffes and antelopes line the wayside stations to Bulawayo. There a similar trumpery trade from Barotseland meets the traveller.

Everywhere imported goods, often aping African forms, are demanding a money-market which can only be met by the making of sub-economic 'quickies' or by submission to mine and farm labour. Quaint curios sold to the visiting aunts of settlers, the rich guests of great White hunters or the riff-raff of passing steamers, are the African's inadequate reply to his own demand for exotic manufactured wares. There is no going back. God grant that the African will be permitted to go forward. Here is our natural market, and the essence of the market lies in the ability of trader to meet with trader for a fair and full exchange of goods on either side, art for art, produce for produce.



Divining bowl for the detection of witches, from the Bavenda of the Northern Transvaal, South Africa. The bowl is filled with water, and the movements of seeds floating on the surface and touching various symbols carved on the bowl are observed. Diameter  $12\frac{1}{2}$  in.