

# WEST AFRICAN WOOD CARVING

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Fame was first brought to West African art by the British expedition to Benin in 1897. The members of that expedition, which was sent to avenge the ambushing and massacre of a small unarmed group of British who insisted on trying to visit Benin against the wishes of its ruler, the *Oba*, discovered and brought back to Europe a vast amount of bronze castings, ivory carvings and other works which astonished connoisseurs and enriched the museums and private collections of Europe and America. Benin art, however, is not typical of the traditional art of West Africa, for it was in the main a court art: the mass of the work was done exclusively for the *Oba*, on whose well-being the prosperity of the state was believed to depend. Except for the recent and short-lived state of Abomey in Dahomey, few other West African states were similar to Benin.

On the contrary. The art, for example, of the Yoruba states of Nigeria was much more democratic, though the society had a hierarchical organization comparable to that of Benin and maintained traditional relations with it, since the *Oba's* dynasty was of Yoruba origin. The chiefs might have more and finer works of art than the common people, but the latter had in their household and communal shrines, or used in their dances, works of the same kind as the chiefs possessed. Possibly owing to the great demand for carved and other works of art, the Yoruba carvers were professionally organized. But among peoples who had a more restricted political organization based on clan or village, there was less professionalization, and often each man was his own artist, making himself whatever he required in the way of carvings such as dance masks or utensils. The wide distribution of art works, the opportunities for artistic expression and the established standards of appreciation current in any African community produced a situation which contrasts greatly with that of to-day. Above all in music and dancing, people had opportunity within the canons of their tribal art for self-expression in a vital and stimulating way.

The place of religion in West African art is usually emphasized, for it is true that little was done for other than religious purposes. This was not because religious organizations dominated African

life, but because for Africans spiritual forces pervaded all of life. Before any important step in life was taken, it was necessary to be sure that the powers likely to be concerned were well disposed. Wood carvings were not idols—people were not so foolish as to suppose that a piece of wood could affect their destiny—they were shrines to concentrate the attention, and a medium through which communication could be made with spiritual beings. With some supposed powers in the universe, distinct from deities, carvings served a purpose somewhat analogous to an electric-light switch—provided that the wiring, or in this case the propitiation, was done properly! Experience brought conviction that any supreme deity was too far away to be closely concerned with human affairs and, anyhow, was not necessarily beneficent. Concern was, therefore, to propitiate and influence the spirits of nature, whose ways were so unpredictable, and the ancestors, whose watchful influence was felt to be ever-present. Festivities and expensive sacrifices were the usual means employed.

The essential factor, however, to be noted in West African art is not its religious content, but that dancing takes a central place among the arts, in the way that architecture does in Europe. All European art is influenced by architecture; for example, the scale of all plastic arts and the 'shape' of drama and music. But the arts of West Africa are derived rather from nature and the open air. Scale is given by such factors as the human form and natural objects such as trees; the background to art is nature, not a wall. For some reason, possibly the lack of easily-worked permanent building materials, or the luxuriant growth of vegetation, building has never taken an important place among the West African arts, although this does not mean that there is no merit in the indigenous buildings. It might seem that the idea of permanence, which the buildings of Western civilization suggest and to which they seem to aspire in spite of the lesson of Ozymandias, is not one towards which Africans tend; with them the idea of organic growth, decay and rebirth seems more congenial. Dancing, itself a transitory art, provides an occasion for music by voice and instrument, for colour in costumes, for sculpture in masks, and for expressive movement. It takes place in the open, often in a clearing surrounded by trees into which the masked dancers with attendants emerge suddenly from the background. The orchestra, the instruments of which may be decorative works of art in them-

selves, and the lively and expectant encircling crowd of dark-skinned onlookers provide a frame for the performers, who would lose much of their dramatic coherence and solidity on a conventional stage or against a light-coloured background.

Unimaginative people of all countries are apt to scorn what is strange, without being conscious of the absurdities in their own customs. Thus African art has often been dismissed by Europeans as childish—because it is not photographic, disregards natural proportions, and arouses enthusiasm and excitement especially in its dance and musical forms. This contemptuous and insular attitude towards things African long delayed the appreciation or the encouragement of African art by Europeans: an art which had so little relevance to the needs of aggressive Western materialism was bound to be not easily understood. But in recent years, although too late for the survival of much traditional work, a more sympathetic approach has appeared, and African art is now examined in its context and, as far as can be ascertained, as viewed by its creators and users. Thus it is realized that the greater part of West African woodcarving is composed of masks and other equipment for dancing, which should be seen in their context of movement, colour and sound in order for their qualities to be fully appreciated. The formal significance of a carving is somewhat different when it is being worn from when it is hanging in a museum, because movement and costume can alter the apparent quality of a mask. It is not always the most technically finished carving that is the most effective in use.

It is risky to generalize about West African carving, for exceptions exist to even the most usual assumptions, such as that heads are carved disproportionately large for bodies. It may be safe, however, to claim that it is not the intention of African carving to represent natural form as it actually appears. Africans have the keenest appreciation of rhythmic and ordered movement, of certain aspects of natural harmony and of controlled created form. Although the unclothed human form is very familiar to them, their carving shows no trace of the narcissism common to Classical sculpture. Generalized impressions unconsciously imprinted upon the mind of a carver may give a suspicion of portraiture to particular carvings. But the sort of attitude that makes an African see the humour in the misfortunes of another, produces a comic element in African carving—an element which in some cases may be the cause of the

exaggeration of certain features of the human body and which is present in some of the most hideously-intended works. If African carving is seen as attempting to represent the outward shape of simple attributes, such as beauty, fierceness, dignity or decay, thought of in spirit form, an approach to its appreciation may be easier.

Prestige was with African, as it is with other, cultures an important motive in the production of art. Dance societies rivalled one another to have the most impressive masks, and religious cults hoped to attract attention by the fineness of their cult possessions. It is remarkable that under these circumstances sculpture should have retained its fresh and spontaneous qualities. It is also significant that with few exceptions, and those modern, West African art is not a typical peasant art. And this is an attribute to the democratic character of African society, since peasant art is a popular imitation of the art of social superiors. In Africa there was usually no deep differentiation between the art of the chief and that of the ordinary citizen, or between that of rich and poor, because there was no real social distinction either. Of course, in this respect, West African art is similar to that of other integrated non-literate communities.

African carving has vigour, simplicity and precision, but lacks the exuberance which characterizes some Asiatic styles, and the linear decorativeness of Oceanic work. A life spent in close touch with nature may be a source of vigour and simplicity in carving; but not necessarily so, since there are other peasant peoples whose sculpture does not possess these qualities. It seems that the West Africans have a genius for the appreciation of shape in the round—a perception which shows itself again in their dancing. In view of the exuberance of nature in the tropics, exuberance might be expected in African art. But it appears only in dancing. Restraint is more usual, and there is even sometimes a poverty of decorative imagination. The possibilities of the combination of musical instruments, for example, are not exploited. It is curious, for instance, that the Fanti of Ghana should be satisfied with a *sansa* which has only three notes. Does the African, in spite of his great social vitality, suffer like modern Western man from scepticism? Or do we see now only the remains of a culture which tropical disease and the European slave trade have together very largely destroyed?