

# AICA

THE INDIVIDUEL, THE COLLECTIVE AND THE UNIVERSAL  
QUALITY IN THE ART OF BLACK AFRICA AND EUROPE

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1. Colombo and Lissabon

In the written history of mankind we are recognizing two main relationships between the peoples of the Orient and the Occident: martial altercation, crusades and expeditions of destruction, enterprise of trade and of world trade. In many, indeed in most cases, the two relationships form a dialectic unity stemming from the one and only will to gain markets and might. The industrial countries' political and economical urge to expand brought their technical and scientific achievements like a late gift of the dance to all parts of the earth. Human civilization, however, is not Europe's gift to the rest of the world. In the depth of the ages early cultures were emerging and high cultures were developing when Europe was still living in barbarious conditions.

In our time the great liberation movements of peoples living outside of modern civilization began to merge and are - in analogy or in touch with the socialist revolutions - aiming for liberation not only from colonial bondage but also from the economical exploitation of neoimperialism.

In the early sixties, when reknown scientists and cultural workers congregated in Vienna for "European Discussions", I have pointed out in my lecture on "the unity of the world in the vision of art" that such a congregation was limited in scope. No relevant problem of society and culture could be solved in terms of an isolated Europe. Shadows of paneuropean recollections hovered about these discussions. Utopian ideas or melancholic thoughts of Europe as saving angel of civilization lingered on.



The hegemonistic systems of the occidental world were built upon a political and in more recent times increasingly economic base. There is no doubt, however, that these systems are also effective in the realm of culture and art. It is required, therefore, in this area as well to revise the interpretation of yesterday which was the expression of old constellations and mainly written in the spirit of an europocentric outlook.

The central topic of the Assembly of the developing countries in Colombo was bent on the revision of an outmoded hegemony of the industrial countries and an economic rule being more just.

Would it be unjustified to say that the topic of the AICA-meeting at Lissabon is serving the purpose of finding a rule and appreciation of culture doing more justice to the so-called art of the primitives?

Three years ago the AICA summoned to Zaire an extraordinary meeting dedicated to the art of Africa. Then as now the attention is focussing for the first time on african art, i.e. on its significance for modern art.

if the policy of non-alignment is a necessary and active instrument of the peoples' antiimperialistic fight to liberate the developing part of the world from discrimination and exploitation, then the spiritual superstructure of this fight is a revision of the cultural, aesthetic hegemonism of Europe and the western world.

The recognition that these peoples take part in culture on a world-wide level is opening new dimensions of the equality of rights and of the world as a whole in the vision of art.

## 2. Revision of art history

A short time ago the first of six volumes of the "Propylaen History of Europe" has been published. This will be a set of books generated by the reactionary conception of Waldemar Besson who found that there was "no world history outside of Europe".

This europocentric conception has been carried on even after the author's death in 1971. However, art histories have been written in majority according to this notion. A successful world history of art, translated into many languages, is written by the german-american art historian Horst W. Janson. Of 500 pages the author dedicates 50 pages to the renaissance, 10 pages deal with the art of Africa and the Pacific, and in the appendix India, the Far East and precolumbian art are covered on 8 pages. These are not examples picked out at random but exemplary cases of a situation which calls for a different way of treating the art of african peoples. There are of course important histories of art dealing with the art of all peoples. But these too have not as yet taken up the changes which the political structures have really undergone and did not sufficiently take into account the most recent results of scientific research.

In our century the human being is seeing itself in reality and in the mirror of art in a basically different way. A scientific historical appreciation and a synthetic summary of all spaces and times is required: the revision of the europocentric hierarchy and outmoded scales of values: re-examination of changing notions in art, the appreciation of art and its works as a comprehensive process in which the so-called primitive art<sup>and</sup> the art of non-european peoples are not dealt with in addition to the occidental realms of culture, but as parts having equal rights and equal value: art as a universal phenomenon, as unity of social, spiritual and aesthetic transformations

### 3. Proportions and magic of the african art in the reception of modern art

The political subjection and acquisition of african territories happened in a time when ethnography and art history were still fully europocentrically orientated and could not apprehend the significa-



tion of primitive art. Governmental and mission's schools aggravated the Africans' feeling of inferiority. The possibilities of life and development appeared to consist solely in following the civilization which was brought from Europe and to sever the ties with one's own past. In the year 1879 the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro was opened as first collection of non-european art.

The essays of Leo Frobenius published at the end of the 19th century on african rock-art belong to the early endeavours to draw the world's attention to african art. His most important works, however, followed in the 20th century and were considered at the time, and for rather a long time, with misgivings. One was not willing to believe in the author's message that there was human creativeness in this "dark" part of the world.

Towards the end of the 19th century a tide of cultural pessimism took over in Europe, generating in the consciousness of the artists a fierce rebellion against the climate of the rising technical civilization. They turned to the images of primeval times and the world of archaic shapes which was corresponding to their urge to penetrate the external non-mysterious look of things and to put ~~the~~ essence in place of ~~the~~ appearance. The art of the primitive peoples and the mask in their centre had a significant function in the vital renewal of european art and lead at the same time to a rupture with the existing tradition: Paul Gauguin's voyage to the Antilles (1887) was the prelude to this change.

Apparently Pablo Picasso is the most consistent witness to the experiments of creating new cosmogonies, day-myths, out of the encounter with the early cultures. In his work we can extremely well recognize how great the adventure is in which the artists of our century are engaged. Picasso, with his refined sensorium, has revived the antique heritage, has infringed on the europocentric tyranny and procured admittance to the contemporary will of shaping for all cultures: for the iberic-archaic and the pre-roman shapes, for ~~the~~

*demonic*  
the demonic myths of the Minotaure, for the chant of the figures on attic vases, for the mediterranean light, the dark world of Africa's idols and the demoniac quality of precolumbian deities. In Picasso's sketches of female nudes for the composition of figures "Les Femmes d'Alger" the optics of Cezanne, the recollections of iberic forms of figure and the magic power of negro masks are congregating. The innate instinct and the quick understanding of this artist were able to fill the space's architecture of transposed reality-forms with the tension and intensity of fetishes.

The plain surfaced simplification of shape and the demonic substance of the female nudes are filled with a foreign and tamed - but seemingly heterogenous spirit of archaic and magic ranges. The so-called negro-phase in Picasso's work, however, is fully achieved in analytical cubism only.

Here, for the first time in modern art, the mask face of Africa is used to nourish the masterly emptied forms of civilization's art with the saps coming from deep-rooted shaping instinct. Initially it is less of an intrusion by the art forms of the primitive races into the artist's aesthetic consciousness and more of a convergency of his aims and experiments with the art of the primitives.

African art was gaining basic importance in the development of modern european and american sculpture. Derain, Vlaminck, Schmidt-Kottluff, Pechstein, Kirchner and the other painters of "the Bridge" were moved by the emblems of its forms and the abrupt lead of the crude colours. Whereas the masks of Africa embodied principles of forms for the cubists, the artists of the Bridge-circle went beyond: with the masks and carved beams of the primitives the exotic world was brought into their workshops as part of their style of life.

Modigliani has been very much stimulated by the vigor of negro sculpture. His solemnly stylized oval female faces stemming from Brancusi call to mind the masks in the dances of the african secret



clans Senufo, Baule and Fang.

Jacques Lipchitz belongs to the masters of modern art who carried along the precious luggage of their creative inspiration when they fled from the barbarity of the Third Reich to the USA. He had overcome the orthodox cubism but was retaining the regularity of its simplifying picture architecturing and organizing rhythms. Some of his sculptures are bearing something of the vegetative phantastic and the primitive forms of african negro idols and South Pacific sculpture.

Max Ernst created enigmatic archetypical forms which have been lifted from manifold caved-in substrata of consciousness inspite of the disguising ironical namings. The bronze sculpture "The King plays with the Queen" stands in the garden of his house in Huismes. The horned bust of the king whose arms clutch the smaller figure, evokes the magic of Africa's images. It is almost irrelevant if Max Ernst visualized the western Sudan's Senufo tribes' masks with bull and bird when shaping this sculpture. For him, works of the primitive cultures are objets trouvés out of the realm of drives and instincts, building blocks of the subconscious which are unified with the superconscious experiences of a later age to become creatures of enlarged optic reality.

The teaching of proportion valid since Greece/<sup>consists</sup> in seeking a synthesis of natural anatomy and poetic ideality. The teaching was alive from Polyklet to Leonardo da Vinci, from Duerer to this day. Only by the encounter with the proportion of Africa and <sup>hell</sup> outer european art Picasso and Henry Moore became possible.

For the avantgarde of Europe the culture of black Africa was of significance due to its vitality and <sup>strange</sup> strength of forms which brought intensity and lively tension to the masterly lifeless forms of european art.

#### 4. Art of preindustrial peoples.

The artists of the primitive root in religious mythical imaginations. The anonymous artists have the feeling of being links in an infinite lineage and are identifying themselves with their work. The primitive sculptor is less endeavouring to shape the externally visible than its interior signification. The African natural religion which is kindred to the "soul matter" and the imaginations of Mana in Polynesia, inspires the artist to produce ritual sculpture in veneration of gods and ghosts and the cult of the dead. The impenetrable restraint the taut simplicity of the plain surfaced and dynamically tamed matter he is shaping lends the idols and masks their magical radiancy. An overall valid quality of these masks is their being elementary compact and sculpturally conceived as homogeneous. All forms grow of the organic structure of the material. It is the primeval rhythm of nature's course which is lingering on in these mask-images and endows them with the power of superpersonal and enigmatic emblems. Masks are figurations of creed and their artful shape lends duration to the transient picture of the sublime. They are projections of super-terrestrial powers, summarized in ritual images.

Is it nowadays still possible to penetrate into the spirit of their being and to comprehend and interpret the masks, detached from their rites? As with the icons of Byzantium and the stained glass windows of gothic cathedrals we seek approach to their iconographic meaning, but to the same extent we value them in aesthetic terms as objets d'art. The main regions of masks belong to the East African spheres of culture: the tribes of Nigeria, Yoruba, the old cultural centre Benin and the peoples of the Gold and Ivory coast and still farther on unto the Congo basin and Angola. African mask dances as punishing and organizing powers enter into the cult of the dead, into fertility and initiation rites.



The powers to be inherent in the masks called for high perfection of shaping. The maskmaker produced the mask according to traditional precepts for a special occasion. He was working within a fixed Canon, the mask was to equal a certain imagination of certain deities and to be recognized by all.

A cherished secret knowledge passed on by the fathers was at work when producing from lifeless material the shape which was going to emanate power and to give life. To this effect the perfection and intrinsic vigour which today we use to call "art" was required.

The primeval masks have not been created with artistic intentions: they served ritual purposes, as does all early art. Their intrinsic value was their magic effect. What is moving us in the artwork of early periods is not ability which became obsolete in the course of technical development, but the message it is still retaining: the interior imagination of things - not their exterior likeness.

The masks of primitive races were created by collectively creative tradition as implements of cult. The imaginary visuality of the mask turns into a work of art when the material gets transparent and ideas and matters result in a spiritual reality which inspires emotion and poetry. The primeval urge to bring down to earth indefinable and metaphysical forces, to grasp them in visual forms, called for deepest empathy and perfect imagery.

##### 5. Idols and fetishes in the workshops of European and American artists of the 20th century.

The return of European and North American artists to the fetishes and idols of primitive man is reflecting the crisis of society and art in the age of science. A modern iconography of desperation is coming forth. The dark way without prospects leads from Kafka to Beckett. Poets, painters, sculptors, philosophers, musicians of non-perspectivity and the absurd are sparsely populating the desert

country of modern civilization and put on a final play. Man in primeval times was deeply shocked by the apparently tangled and chaotic happenings in nature. Today, inspite of - and perhaps on account of - atomic fission, cybernetics and the dispatch of rockets into the universe, man is living in the tangle of an enlarged new reality which to him is by no means less obscure and easier to cope with.

Modern art, its imagery and figural signs, disguised in the costume of the 20th century, bears in many aspects a resemblance with the initial and early ages of mankind.

The arrogance of a mechanistic belief in progress saw in any emancipation from the basic model installed since the Renaissance a relapse of art into "barbary". "Urangst" und "Existenzangst", however, have their analogy on different levels of consciousness: pre-personal and post-personal symptoms of social existence are touching each other. The magician - artist of Africa which by getting in touch with industrial society and modern technology is uprooted and loses his feeling of unity with cosmic powers of nature, cannot believe any more in the matter of idols charged with soul power, whereas the modern artist endeavours to endow his work with a magical pluralism of significance. Both meet in the unity of their contrasts at the crossing points of history's developments. The African artist was the maker of tools used for influencing the cosmos and for mobilizing life forces. Each of his ritual instruments had a purpose of use: the mask, the statue of the forefathers, the charm and the nail fetish. The magical act of driving in nails at a certain spot of an antropomorphous wooden statue which the carver had filled with "Nyama", the life matter, is said to have the effect of healing from pain or illness at the analogous spot in the patient.

Telekinesis, caused by driving in iron thorns and nails which in the course of time are armouring the wooden statues with spikes, may also



serve aggressive and destructive purposes.

The hidden power of such statues corresponding to the pictures of saints and the relics of other religions, is tied to belief and disappears with the original view of life of Africa.

Hence also for those procedures which are considered to be specific inventions of 20th Century's European art there are analogies to be found in sculptures of the primitives. The grotesque-eery troubadours of a late surrealism which Eduardo Paolozzi produced by assembling parts of machinery, wheels and metal spikes resemble the Konde-figures of nail fetishes in Bakongo. Guenter Uecker's bright nail tapestries and Dusan Dzamonja's fetish-like configurations being armoured by a pin-forest of spikes belong here.

Are the modern idols of cybernetics transmuted forms of their archaic prototypes? Totem creatures of the age of machinery?

#### 6. Whereto is the art of Black Africa turning?

Whereas the artists of Europe and America refreshed their imagination, sophisticated by intellect and technization, by turning to the fountainheads of the archaic and primitive and by availing themselves of the instinct and vitality of African idol carvers, the peoples of Africa themselves were awakening from their sleep in the primeval forests and began to liberate themselves at the same time from the idols of their magicians and the power influences of the white empires. For its next development Black Africa evidently needs first of all instruction, electrification and social re-organization.

The tribal art tied to tradition was doomed by the crash with technical civilization. The young generation of artists in Black Afrika was born into an age when along with the myths and tabus of their gods their traditional art passed away. These artists' consciousness, stemming from an early world of archaic imagery, is confronted without transition with the view of life of modern science. The artists whose

fathers were still believing in the magic power of fetishes are "speechless" when confronted with the scientific magic language of mathematized logic. With the political separation from the colonial powers the domination of the earlier rulers' culture is still not abolished: for the time being, the language of the more developed culture cannot be substituted as the terminology of science and technology exists exclusively in the languages of highly developed countries.

Is this to be bridged over by an accelerated technical development? The application of complicated mechanisms requires skilled manpower which, however, has first to grow up.

Will the needed know-how which the technicians have to catch up with in the process of their growing up not be outdated already by the science of computer society developing in geometrical proportion? Industrial development is impossible without scientific research and technical planning. Can and may we expect from the developing peoples what the peoples of highly developed industrial countries did not achieve: to build up a modern civilization without endangering or destroying the natural environment? In his book "Structural Anthropology" Claude Lévi-Strauss writes: "A primitive people is not a retarded or backward people. In this or that field it can show an inventive or creative spirit leaving the achievements of the civilized way behind".

From the endangering and the errors of supermodern industrial society the people of Black Africa can possibly draw the conclusion that technical progress is only worthwhile to be aspired to when in harmony with nature. Perhaps the faculties of the African peoples still in close touch with nature succeed in creating a different kind of civilization which includes nature, the mother of all life.

Because the riches of Black Africa's life and art lie in its uncorrupted natural force, its elementary and instinctive trend to creativeness.



In a yougoslav newspaper of Sunday, 1st August 1976, there was a short announcement: congratulations cabled by Resident Tito to President Mathieu Kerekou on the occasion of the people's Republic Benin's declaration of independence being one year old.

The customarily worded unspectacular diplomatic message was touching to me: the resurrection of this state, whose bronze and brass sculptures of the 16th to the 19th century are well known to us, and which finally had been destroyed by a British punitive expedition in the year 1897, is filling us with hope. May it succeed in re-establishing the old culture in a new way.

The work of art of Benin are to be found almost entirely in the museums of Europe or in collections. They give rise to the question if these sculptures which are so important to the spiritual identity of these people, will ever find their way back to their homeland.

Since the century of enlightenment the commanders in chief used to be accompanied by a staff of scientists which added art trophies to war trophies. The important European museums have been enlarged by the pillage of conquered towns. This, to be sure, has again lead to archeological activity, to scientific findings and to the deciphering of primeval cultures.

When the conference of the non-aligned peoples was being prepared in one of the latest sessions of a special UNESCO-committee, the question of giving back the works of art most important to the cultural and national self assurance was discussed. However, confrontation in the field of culture, was to be avoided, as art is of universal significance and belongs to mankind. For the time being, the clarification of this problem is kept pending. Time, space and manner of a settlement have not been discussed as yet. But one day the question will become a topical one.

7. The individual, the collective and the universal (quality) in art.

The artists of the archaic and of the primitive did not consider themselves as creators of their works. They had the task to produce configurations for ritual purposes, they worked anonymously and ranged with the tribal community. The creative was reserved to the deities.

Our times' consciousness of industry is bringing art near to that early state of anonymity, to the principle of team work.

Is there any possibility to shorten the process of development on the way from tribal group-consciousness to personality in a nation which is forming itself? Be it by not separating the individual from the community, but by reaching a multivoiced collectivity of personalities? The artists of Africa must not take over the romantic classical notion of the isolated genius who is shaping the works of art for a spiritual elite. They must rather turn to new media which are operating in the industrial world and are dealt with by groups of artists working in different lines. Here the creative forces of handed down tradition can possibly be unified with the principles of modern art.

It certainly remains an open question whereto the sons of the significant wood carvers and bronze founders of Ife and Benin, of the Senufo, Aschanti, Baule will turn.

Shall they too have to consummate the adventure of 20th century's modern art, living and enduring it in the way of their European colleagues?

The european art of great discoveries and manyfold desperation, of originality and passing activity grew out of a different social and spiritual order. Its various styles, achievements and changes belong to the late period of the middle-class era.

It seems to me that it would not make sense to copy this art. Neither would it make sense to copy all economical structures of the industrial world.



When we formulate these questions, however, we speak to our colleagues, the young critics and foremost to the artists of Africa.

The majority of the developing peoples are sensing the confrontation with the structures of knowing and power of the industrial countries as hopeful necessity and at the same time as a unavoidable menace and endangering of their own identity.

A co-operation leading to a world community can only become possible out of a growing mutual acknowledgement in freedom and autonomy.

The prerequisite for the unity of the peoples is the recognition of each people's limitation and the might of their community. The creative imagination which is apparent in all cultures can express itself in the many colours and forms of all continents, their undividedness is consisting in just prerequisites for a pluralistic existence.

Direction and essence of our era lie perhaps in the overcoming of the europocentric conception; in the bridging over of the contrasts of East and West and in the creation of that culture of humanity grown out of the adverse unity of modern civilization.