

Preserving a Pure Aesthetic

In all African cultures, to a greater or lesser extent, art as a form of language and expression seeks to strengthen man's links with his environment



Seen until recently as minor artistic expressions, decorative art and artisanship have lately commanded a great deal of attention. Whereas painting and sculpture ranked at the top in the traditional hierarchy, there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of artisanship. Indeed it seems reasonable to ask why a functional piece, whose wrought materials reflect both the environment in which it evolved and the creative talent of a people, should be less meaningful than a non-functional work of art.

Yet *art* may not be the most appropriate word to use here because of its semantic conno-

tations. The concept of art as a creative process varies greatly between Europeans and Africans. The latter tend to express and translate a part of their own universe into the forms they mold, whether they are artists or artisans. African art fascinates the viewer because of its emotional intensity, the beauty of its shapes, and its overwhelming power and spiritual quality.

Above all, African art is functional. Functionality is its *raison d'être*, whether its purpose is economic, magic or religious. Yet the shapes it assumes, be they masks, sculptures, domestic utensils, pottery, music or dance, seem to involve the perennial confrontation between the real and the imagined, between the

down-to-earth and the transcendental. Paul Klee, one of the many Europeans who were influenced by African art, said once that art's purpose is to render the invisible visible.

Art as a communal endeavor

Supernatural forces that seem to mold the destinies of mankind are the main source of inspiration for African artists, who try to convey them directly into a shape. This is in sharp contrast with the endeavor of European artists who, under the influence of Greek tradition until the 19th century, sought to express the divine by means of concrete, known shapes, such as the human figure.

African artists belong to no specific social class. They may be peasant sculptors, or iron-smiths endowed with magic powers. The formal meaning of divine forces is accessible to any sensitive individual in communal religious rites. Thus a sculptor may reproduce the work of another without necessarily becoming a plagiarist: his copy will be seen as a compliment.

African art has a collective quality in contrast with the individualistic quality of European art. For Africans, the community comes before the individual, who is no more than one link of a long tradition. In this sense, the community extends itself to embrace Nature, the soil and the land its ancestors belonged to. Mores are perpetuated through rites and tradition, and thus the social balance is preserved. This pattern of behavior involves all of the vital expressions and manifestations of the individual artist; his artistic production is regulated by communal praxis and morality.

As a result, African art is forever in harmony with Nature. It is nearer to life, and interpreting its forms is always possible to all members of the society that produces them.

Foreign influence

Because of its communal nature, African art tends to reflect the past. It expresses a certain established way of being in the world; it helps man to communicate with the supernatural.

In all African cultures, to a greater or lesser extent, art as language or expression abstains from challenging or breaking away from established values, though traditional modes of expression keep continually evolving: exceptionally gifted individuals may surpass the limits dictated by tradition and contribute to extend the range of artistic expression. The pace and intensity of this evolutionary process may depend on foreign pressures.

The advent of foreign migration and the introduction of mercantilist values, which placed Africans in contact with European habits, have pushed them away from their original culture. Artists seem no longer motivated by the telluric forces peculiar to their social and cultural environment.

New consumption habits have a way of immediately threatening the survival of traditional artisanship. Beautifully ornamented wooden spoons are replaced by ordinary metal spoons; wooden cups give way to enamelled ones; carved wood plates and decorative pottery are replaced by European, Indian or Japanese bric-a-brac; finely decorated tobacco horns are superseded by stamped tin boxes; and the youth, disdaining the traditional *tihuhlo* fat, oint their bodies with European or Indian-made scented oil.



By placing African man in contact with urban centers, migration and mercantile values have taken him away from his original culture

However, if virtually all utilitarian production is quickly replaced by commercial items, African artists can still survive through the mass production of souvenirs for foreign tourists.

The law of supply and demand

Thus sculptors become mere woodcarvers. Traditional models will often be reproduced mechanically, without much care or conviction. African artisans will no longer be guided by a desire to give expression to their culture, but by the law of supply and demand. Indeed, to produce in large quantities, as easily and quickly as possible, pricing their products no longer on the basis of artistic merits but of material costs, may be the unfortunate option now left to many artists on the African continent.

Nevertheless, in spite of their new social conditions, African

artists remain the holders and perpetuators of aesthetic values and concepts inherited from their ancestors. Even when shapes are new, when objects no longer refer to local traditions in their details or finishing, the signs of the force and vitality of an entire culture are always there.

African art had a revigorating impact on European art. Modigliani, Picasso, Klee, Lipchitz and many others were inspired by it. On the other hand, one should recognize that European and other influences on African art have not necessarily been disastrous.

Styles evolve with history. Throughout Africa one can now find new clothing patterns, new types of fabrics, embroideries, jewels, hairstyles which, though they are not traditionally African, are not recognizably European or Asiatic. They are merely pan-African. (Mário Trindade) ●