

"Art of Africa: Central Africa." In *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, pp. 23-24, edited by Phillip Whitten and David E. Hunter. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

ART OF AFRICA: CENTRAL AFRICA

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—Nelson H. H. Graburn, *University of California, Berkeley*

**and Society.** The anthropological study of art, sometimes called "primitive art," focuses on the contextual setting in which art is produced and used. The anthropologist, as anthropologist, is not an art critic. His or her concern is with the meaning of a frozen bit of culture, in its proper socio-cultural setting. To discern the meaning of an item of art, it is necessary to know its relationships with other art items and the social and cultural settings as well. By this is meant all the imaginative expressions of the human mind—painting, sculpture, music, folklore, and the like.

**Social Factors and Art.** Because anthropological science began with the study of smaller, homogeneous societies, an approach to cultural products (including art) developed which stressed the entire situation (holism). These small societies tended to be isolated, nonliterate, and lacking in time specialists. The audiences for art objects tended to know each other and to value them. "They knew what they liked" and were quick to make their judgments known to the artist. Indeed such audiences have been observed to criticize works as they were being produced—thus giving the artist instant feedback. In simple societies art has a use beyond the aesthetic. It is made for a practical purpose—to be part of a ritual, to be used as a drinking vessel, and so on. There is no art produced for museums, although a lot of art consists of decorated sculptures (such as housebeams) and uten-

sils. This experience with small societies has influenced the way anthropologists view art in larger ones. They still look for social factors in interpreting its meaning. Thus, while

an American writer differs in social position from a storyteller among the Ibo of Nigeria, an understanding of both their social positions and functions is necessary to an understanding of their cultural products. In fact, there is still room for a good deal of ethnographic research on the role of the artist in various sociocultural contexts. More work such as that of Roger Abrahams and Charles Keil is needed. These two men have followed a tradition pioneered by Ruth Bunzel in her study of a Zuni potter. All three have looked at the role of creation. The importance of the artist's social position, motivation, attitude, training, use of his or her creation—all are given careful attention. Furthermore, the indigenous standards of excellence are examined. Abrahams calls this attention to the interaction between artist and audience the rhetorical approach to folklore. The object of creation has an especially important, sometimes supernatural, position in homogeneous societies—even those found within larger societies.

**Anthropology and Art Criticism.** Anthropologists have, since the days of Franz Boas, opposed the application of universal standards of judgment on art products. The total misunderstanding of African art has provided an object lesson. Ceremonial objects were interpreted in a Western frame of reference by critics who had no knowledge of the original context in which these objects were used. Various theories of "primitive prelogical mentality" were put forth to explain African and other primitive art.

The anthropological stress on understanding the total context has led to some changes in art criticism in our own society. Even specialists, after all, belong to some community, and a contextual approach, or Abrahams' rhetorical approach, can illuminate the interaction between artists and their audiences in the most industrialized countries. Eventually such an approach should produce truly valuable comparative studies of art and society.

See also Aesthetic appreciation; Art; Art, primitive

Consult: Abrahams, Roger D., "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* (81)320:1-16, 1968; Boas, Franz, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover, 1927); Bunzel, Ruth, *The Pueblo Potter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929); Keil, Charles, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

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**Art of Africa: Central Africa.** The peoples of the Zaire Republic and neighboring areas have produced an immense variety of sculptures. Depending on diverse ethnic groups and stylistic areas, they range from human and animal figurines to masks, staffs, scepters, neckrests, stools, cups, boxes, slit-drums, bells, posts, and plankboards, and include delicately carved spear shafts and handles of axes, adzes, and knives. These sculptures are made in many different media. Preference is given to specified types of wood; but ivory, bone, iron, copper, stone, clay, and resin are also used. Masks are often intricate constructions made of a combination of wood, cloth, fibers, hide, resin, and metal. Some sculptures are richly adorned with decorative designs, beads, shells, exuviae, metal, or other materials; others excel by their unadorned simplicity. Colors

Wood and cloth fetish figure, from the Byaka tribe, the Congo.



(mostly red, white, black) may be applied to the entire sculpture or to parts of it. Some objects are darkened by means of fire, smoke, hot irons, or treatment with saps or mud; others are beautifully patinated through intensive usage and oiling. Oil, blood, or resin may be added to the surfaces in the course of consecration and usage.

The greatest diversity of sculpture occurs in the southern half of the Zaire Republic, overlapping into the Congo (Brazzaville), N Angola, and W Zambia. Among the better known art-producing groups we encounter, from west to east, the Kongo, Teke, Yaka, Suku, Mbala, Pende, Cokwe, Kuba, Nden-gese, Luluwa, Lunda, Kanyok, Songye, Luba, and Tabwa. Many of these peoples have matrilineal and centralized political institutions, but there are several exceptions. All are Bantu-speakers, and many of the entities have close linguistic and historical connections. Among these entities are numerous smaller and larger groups—such as Dzing, Yans, Holo, Lwalwa, Mbagani, and Salam-pasu—where outstanding artistic traditions have flourished.

In the northern half of the Zaire Republic, overlapping into the Congo (Brazzaville), the Central African Republic, and the Sudan, the sculptural traditions have developed on a somewhat lesser scale throughout the rain

Wood and leather chief's chair, from the Tokwe of Central Africa.



forest and into the northern savannas, among such Bantu-speaking peoples as the Mongo, Ngala, Tetela, Mitoko, Lengola, Pere, Komo, Yela, Bali, and Lega, and among such non-Bantu peoples as the Ngbaka, Ngbandi, Mono, Furu, Zande, Mangbetu, and Bari. In many parts of this vast region, the relative scarcity of sculpture is amply compensated by rich smithing traditions, culminating in a great diversity of knives, swords, spears, arrowheads and spearheads, anklets, bracelets, and neckrings.

The first exhaustive attempts at a systematic classification of the various art styles in Central Africa were made by Olbrechts and Maesen. Detailed studies on specific groups or areas by Bastin, Biebuyck, Bursens, de Sousberghe, Timmermans, Volavkova, and others have added considerable refinement to these classifications, but definitive grouping and interpretation have yet to be produced.

No easy generalizations can be made about the usages, functions, and meanings of these sculptures, since various ethnic groups, and art-using institutions within and across them, have developed highly specific ideas about them. Many sculptures are directly linked with different forms of ancestral cult (heroic, royal, lineage, family, and personal ancestors). Others are intimately associated with beliefs about the survival of the soul and the life force, and are used in conjunction with burial ceremonies and grave sites. A few sculptures form an intrinsic part of healing, hunting, protective and aggressive magic, and divination. In widely scattered areas, sculptures are linked with initiation systems (circumcision and puberty ceremonies; membership in voluntary associations and cult groups). In addition to their ritual, social control, and status functions, they have an important didactic content. Sculptures as insignia and paraphernalia of rank and status, and as power and prestige symbols, also occur in many groups.

In any given group, numerous categories of artworks, with different functions and forms, may be present. A particular artwork can also carry multiple, more or less complementary, meanings and functions, depending to some extent on the context of usage.

In general, little is known regarding the artists, their method of working, their training, their motivations and creative freedom. Our ignorance is due partly to the rapid breakdown of the great artistic traditions in Central Africa under the impact of colonial



Sisal vessel of the Boran tribe, Kenya.

rule. Artists do not belong to exclusive castes, but operate within the framework of lineages, families, and courts. The users and patrons of the arts are overwhelmingly male, but in certain areas women have a special relationship with the arts. Many of the artworks are individually owned by chiefs, village headmen, lineage heads, cult leaders, or common members of the group; some are placed under the control of a collectivity (a lineage, a village, a chiefdom, a ritual community).

See also Art, Art, primitive; Art and society. Consult: Bastin, Marie-Louise, *Art decoratif Tshokwe*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Publicações Culturais, 1961); Biebuyck, Daniel, *Lega Culture. Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Bursens, Herman, *Yanda-Beelden en Mani-Sekte bij de Azande*, 2 vols. (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1962); Cornet, J., *Art de l'Afrique noire au pays du fleuve Zaïre* (Brussels: Beaux-Arts, 1972); De Sousberghe, L., *L'Art pende* (Brussels: Beaux-Arts, 1958); Maesen, Albert, *Arte del Congo* (Rome: De Luca, 1959); Maesen, Albert, *Art of the Congo* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1967); Olbrechts, Frans M., *Plastiek van Kongo* (Antwerp: De Standaard-Boekhandel, 1946).

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