Many extravagant claims have been made for the age of South African rock paintings and engravings. After critically assessing the available evidence, Wilcox concludes, "An age of five centuries for the oldest existing art is about certain, and an age of twenty centuries quite possible, but longer than that painting and petroglyphs under the conditions in which they are found." Elsewhere he states that the available evidence indicates that "not an ensuing petroglyph can be older than six or seven centuries."

In the chapter entitled "Who Were the Engravers," Wilcox supports the view that the engravers were "Bushmen, and of the same tribes (or at least cultures) as the neighbouring painters." The reasoning advanced to support this view is that paintings and petroglyphs were executed by the same people far from contemporary, and in this section the scientific approach which characterizes the rest of the book is replaced by conjecture. In an attempt to answer the question, "Why no engravings in the shelters?" the author suggests that the artists preferred to paint on the walls and engraved only when conditions were not suitable for painting. This is an unsubstantiated supposition. In the text, the issue of where engravings do occur in the same caves as paintings and subjacent matter of the engravings is quite different from that of the paintings, and these differences cannot be simply explained as being the outcome of using different media.

In several other instances Wilcox has not made the fullest use of all the available evidence but nevertheless his book will certainly prove a standard work of reference for a considerable time. Author and publisher alike are to be congratulated for assembling this material in one volume and also for presenting it in such a lucid and attractive manner.

JAMES WALTON


The book comprises a short introduction and succinct, but incisive, comments about form, meaning, interpretation, on nearly 200 sculptures in wood, ivory, stone, metal, mud. This is an original, authoritative, challenging contribution to the study of African sculpture, which will benefit not only the "wide public" to which it is primarily addressed, but everyone interested in African art and culture.

The authors stress the 'personal character' of their selection, which is for this reason called an anthology. But it is clear that this is a selection based on a truly comprehensive knowledge of African sculpture, which has a vividly equal, and on a deeply rooted feeling for it. Altogether there are 51 tribal areas or tribal styles from which examples have been drawn—among them many smaller or less well-known groups. The sculptural modes of individual artists are also examined. What is, however, unique about the approach is that we are presented here with a set of sculptural documents which have never, or very rarely, been reproduced in books. This feature alone gives a special flavour of originality and research to the book, since so many of the previous publications on African art are saturated with the endlessly repetitious reproductions of the same pieces.

The sequence and perspective in which these sculptures are presented and discussed are challenging. The usual geographical and tribal, or tribal-stylistic categories, have been discarded. Instead the authors present 'a new way of looking at African art' in that they attempt to identify the different types of sculptural form in Africa and to show that 'many of the styles and movements widely supposed to have developed for the first time in Europe really represent recurrent modes in the human arts, modes which have always been available to the artist' (p. 4). This is done in a dispassionate and critical manner, thus the authors avoid pitfalls of idle speculation and fanciful interpretation. The attempt is exploratory and heuristic, in order 'to furnish one means of clearing our minds of our own preconceptions. The authors repeatedly, and very judiciously, emphasize the point that 'formal correspondence and convergences seldom extend to similarities of function or intent.'

In the first part of the book, many of the shapes produced by the African artists is examined in terms of classic European art.
Having lately undertaken to review this publication, I was somewhat discouraged to find, on the arrival of the review copy, that it was no book in the accepted sense of containing both letterpress and illustrations, but a photographic catalogue of a number of works, with single-line statements of their provenance, size, and material. All those useful props for the reviewer were lacking; one could not carpt at the author’s predictions of his style, his bias towards an ethnographical or an aesthetic interpretation, the excellence or otherwise of his index, for none of these things were there for comment. Confronted with the photographs, one was left to one’s own devices.

Perhaps this is no bad thing from time to time, and it is salutary to notice one’s reactions to such a situation. At the first display glance the reaction was superficial. "What a typical sixteenth-seventeenth century Benin this is!" "This Ndokisia is quite different." "Ah! That’s surely a Dogon, although I’ve never seen another quite like it," and so on. Identification on this level is of no more value than a glance at the headlines of the morning paper. From that came the realization of the impossibility of making an aesthetic judgment on a piece of sculpture from a single photograph; for one sees it from one angle only, and free-standing sculpture, whether large or small, cannot be appreciated in this way. This, of course, is inevitable, but my second feeling of irritation was, perhaps, more justified. Some variation in the scale of different reproductions set on this page is also almost inevitable, but it is confusing to contemplate a Warega ivory measuring on the page eight and a half inches high, standing check by jowl with a Baule figure measuring four and a half inches high, and only when one has thumbed the way back to the index can one check the conviction that in reality the Warega work is six and a half inches and the Baule 14 inches.

For perceptive observation and the resulting delicate modelling of facial planes the very differing heads of Benin (2), Ogowe at Dan (9 and 10) would be hard to beat by the most sensitive and highly skilled craftsmen of any art. Then when the sum total form of a sculpture is considered, the satisfactory animal shape of the Bambara fetish (41) is splendidly conceived, as is also the equally satisfactory Dogon figure (8) and as close-runners come the Baule figure (31) and the solid little Ogoni mask (32). For the appreciation of texture the grain of the block used for the Dogon mask (14) is outstanding, so is the roughly textured binds on the previous page.

These are all striking from the point of view of form rather than content; but to be honest I find myself shying away from public pronouncements on the subject of content in African sculpture; after spending 30 years in East Africa in close daily contact with the tribes I have heard not to make cheap and easy judgments of what I do not yet fully understand. Let it suffice to pick out those works in this collection which I myself find emotionally moving. There is something very touching about the little Ashtani gold-figure of the hornblower (24); and also the Shango staff of the Yoruba (31), although I have seen other similar specimens to this last which appeal to me more; and for sheer vitality the Dan mask (33) takes a lot of beating.

Am I wrong in feeling that the sixteenth century ivory salt cellar from the Afri-Portugeus. (31) is a bastard art? It has some beautiful qualities, especially in the simple low-relief figures on the base, but as a whole I find it unsatisfactory. These are personal preferences rather than public pronouncements; for it would seem to me impertinent to pontificate on aspects which I still do not profess to feel positive about; but they are an appraisement of qualities common to the arts of all peoples, and so within the comprehension of us all.

MARGARET TROWEI

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This is an account of a people who inhabit an environment inhospitable for a field worker as could be found anywhere, in all probability. Since its publication, Wilfred Thesiger has also written a book about the same people entitled The Marsh Arabs; it is worth reading to gather something of the hardiness of life which, with commendable modesty, is largely veiled in Dr. Salim’s account.

The literature which exists on Sh’ite Muslims is scant. Dr. Salim’s book deals with Muslims of this sect, and it is to be welcomed on this account alone. The ethnographical data in it are profuse, and mostly of good quality. But it is a pity that these parts which deal specifically with Sh’ite ritual and beliefs are so very brief. The short catalogue (pp. 121) gives a glimpse of the riches that exist, and it is hoped that Dr. Salim will give detailed accounts of these in subsequent publications.

This insistence on brevity mars many parts of the book. His chapter on Family and Marriage is another example of the same kind of thing. The danger in this thumbnail sketch of as many aspects of social life as is possible is that important facts requiring expansion and analysis come to be given the same weighting as incidental ones. Thus, a paragraph is devoted to Sh’ta marriage—a practice whereby Sh’ite Muslims are permitted to engage in marriage unions for a specified period—but we are not told what sort of people practice it, what its incidence or whether it is of little significance. The information offered is no more than that given in elementary textbooks on Sh’ite law and could have been omitted without damage. On the other hand the section dealing with the incidence of various types of marriage is much too brief, and the

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Coming down to serious business, on what criteria are the things to be judged? The collector asks us to 'charge boldly into the cultural world' and judge the material "with less intellect, prejudice and greater artistic discernment. 'We are back at the old problem of form and content. Does not artistic discernment depend, partially at least, on some understanding of what the artist is trying to say—and to whom he is saying it? Is it not important to sense whether the individual artist is working with conviction and integrity, and not merely following a dead tradition or seeking to be with it in the latest local fashion? For this there must be some intellectual understanding of the social and religious background which has produced the work, or we easily become a prey to the hawker of faked antiques in ideas if not in material objects.

Happily although full appreciation of the arts in Africa cannot be attained without very considerable sympathetic intellectual effort, and despite the fact that all the latest gimmicks and -isms are Western art today have largely passed Africa by, it is easy while looking at any collection of African sculpture to pick out aesthetic qualities which are universal.


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Daniel p. BIEBUCK

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