

# Black Cinderella

## Our belated discovery of the arts of Africa

Leon Lippel

Number 55, Summer 1969

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58161ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lippel, L. (1969). Black Cinderella: Our belated discovery of the arts of Africa. *Vie des arts*, (55), 34–39.





# BLACK CINDERELLA

our belated discovery of the arts of Africa

by LEON LIPPEL

The original and expressive sculpture of Africa, with its great creative energy, is perhaps the least known of the great arts of the world.

The exhibition of "The Art of the Congo" which came to us from the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, leaves us with an understanding, and perhaps a discovery of the importance of this art, and its place in the religion and philosophy of Africa.

The influence of this art on the painters and sculptors of the 1900's is already known, perhaps too well known, for the tendency is to inspect the work of these artists closely, looking for features of African art. The figures of the Bayakas and the Basonge make us think of Braque or Picasso, the Baoulé figures and masks remind us of Mondrian.

Although there were many following the example of African art in the European art of 1910-1925, these artists did not seek to emulate them, rather they were looking for a means of expression freed from the rigid rules of the 19th century that persisted in contemporary painting and sculpture. In what was called "primitive" art they saw a liberation of form and proportion—a complete freedom of handling. They found that the result was a new and fresh concept of human form. The figures and masks had a dynamism and a power—an immense scale of exploration of form by African artists.

This proliferation of sculptural forms was, perhaps, the greatest contribution to world civilization that Africa has made, even greater, as William Fagg says, than its influence on modern popular music.

The African's world is inhabited by spirits. The spirits of their ancestors, of the tribal chiefs, and of the gods of rain, of fertility, and of the harvest, exert an influence on the daily life of the tribe. It is a spirit world that can work for happiness or misfortune, it must be appeased with sacrifices, and its presence must be invoked by special rites and interminable ceremonial dances. These dance masks represent either an ancestor or a totem animal, or very frequently a mixture of forms, "in abstraction" of all of these elements. Worn with special garments that conceal the person, these masks transform the dancer into a supernatural being. In the creation of these masks, the sculptor's imagination is freed from all references to naturalistic form.

The craftsman's imagination, myths about man's origin, and their interpretations conceal more complex and profound ideas. They are related to religion, to medicine, to divination, and the other activities man believes in, and engages in, to find his place in the universe. It is certain that we will find it difficult to understand African art if we consider the works by our usual art standards.

The difference between African and European thought causes those who try to interpret the expression of a mask or figurine that is really comic and made only to amuse, as a horrible mask made to cause terror. We must try to understand African art in its own terms and not in terms of the values of our civilization. The African artist has revealed a very highly developed sense of design and of form. If I may quote F. H. Lam: "instead of proceeding from the exterior to the interior by an apparently rational approach, it proceeds from the interior to the exterior. It tends to express ideas by having recourse to forms invented according to nature, and not by imitating nature. This art is born in the mind, and the sculptures are beautiful to look at and to touch. Sculpture thus created could be understood by a blind person."

In other words, contrary to Western Impressionist sculptors, whose work plays upon light and shadow, the traditional sculpture of Africa is based upon expression and content.

African ethnic sculpture never attempts to portray a likeness. Even in the famous portraits of the Bakuba kings, these are identified by the emblem of their fame in life. Faces are left non-descript, albeit finely carved and in the style and idiom of the tribe, and the sculptor's aim is to reinstitute the *presence* of the ancestor.

Sculpture in wood is worked with an adze\* with which the masses are blocked out and the secondary volumes established. With perhaps a smaller version of this universally-used instrument he proceeds to develop details, with much of the "facette" finish left on the surface. Further finish varies with each tribe. Some immerse the wood in the mud of a river bank, others cover the sculpture with a mixture of charred wood and palm oil, polishing later with coarse leaves. Frequently, the objects are covered by a patina of sacrificial blood and "magic" material. With the smoke of the hut and constant handling some sculpture attains a brilliant patina.

The Bayaka, Bakuba, Bapende and other Congo tribes use brilliant colours on their masks, with intricately woven fabrics enriched with cowrie shells and beads. The Yoruba in Nigeria also use vivid colours on the masks of the Gelede Society, although earth colours dominate elsewhere on both masks and figures. Ochre clays, kaolin and tukula, a powdered treebark, were used periodically on the sculpture.



Page ci-contre: art du Congo. Masque de danse, YAKA.

Ci-dessus: couple d'ancêtres reliés par une chaîne, OGBONI. Bronze H.: 13½" (34,3cm). Collection particulière.





As the wood is carved in the green state, much sculpture shows splits and cracks, some of which are of great age. Age, however, is a relative term, as in tropical climates, the ravages of insects and the humidity will disintegrate wood in a very few years, even months, unless special precautions are taken. In the savannah of Upper Volta and Mali, tribal carvings have been preserved for generations, and in the semi-desert further North the home of the Dogon in the Biandagara region, ancestor figures and masks have been found in the caves dating back to the 18th Century.

It is therefore difficult to estimate the age of a sculpture. Early explorers of the 16th and 17th Century had brought home African sculpture in wood, bronze and gold, and some may be seen in the great European and American collections. The sacking of Benin City in 1897 revealed, in the Oba's palace, carvings of ivory and castings in bronze by the *cire-perdu* method, which date to the 15th Century. Archaeological discoveries in Nigeria and on the borders of Lake Chad show proof that not only important art centres existed there prior to the 15th Century, but that an extraordinary art—that of the Nok Culture—flourished there before the birth of Christ, in a form unmistakably African.

A study of the ethnic art of Africa reveals a world of sculpture of a diversity of forms and innovations without parallel in the Western world. The geometrical, almost two-dimensional masks of the Dogon in Mali, the Mossi and Bobo tribes of Upper Volta, extravagant head-pieces of the Gelede Society of the Yorubas in Nigeria, south to the bulbous figures and masks of the Cameroon Grasslands, the variety of styles, while keeping to the "classicism" of each tribe, allow for such deviations as may inspire a sculptor in the creation of his work. The symmetry and balance of Baoulé ancestor figures have the dignity and serenity of a Buddha. The awesome Fang sculptures, guarding sacred relics, contrast with their neighbours, the Bakota, who created the "M'bulu-N'gulu," a face in wood, covered in brass strips, with a base inserted into a basket containing the bones of ancestors.

The territory of the Congo, almost at the end of the great sculptural belt stretching down western and central Africa from Senegal to Angola, is the home of some one hundred tribes and sub-tribes. In that vast area of about a million square miles, has been created over the past centuries some of Africa's most dynamic and arresting sculpture. Living close to each other, yet absorbing little of each others ways, each tribe has evolved a cultural style uniquely its own. Some, like the Bayaka on the Kwango River with their severely angular ancestor figures reminiscent of the early cubists; their masks of wood, raffia and textiles heavily encrusted with cowrie shells and beads and of an extravagance of colour, are used in connection with fertility rites, initiation dances or other ceremonies of the "secret societies" are in striking contrast to those of their Bapende further up the river, famous for their "Minyak" masks, triangular faces possessing a mystical quality.

Between the other great tributary, the Kasai, and the Congo River itself are the Batetela, the Dengese and the Bakuba. The latter are a prosperous people, living in rich agricultural

Ci-dessus, à gauche: art du Congo. Statuette mâle, SONGYE; au centre: art du Congo. Statuette culturelle masculine, YAKA; à droite: art du Congo. Figure bisexuée Mpuwu, TEKE. Photos gracieuseté Walker Art Center-Erta Sutherland.  
Page ci-contre: art du Congo. Masque Kakunga, SUKU.











Page ci-contre: art du Congo. Masque, KUBA. Photo gracieuseté Walker Art Center-Erta Sutherland.

Ci-contre, à gauche: tête d'antilope, BAMBARA. Bois. H.: 48" (122cm). Collection particulière; à droite: grand masque dit "Le chasseur". H.: 19 1/2" (49,6cm).

Ci-dessous: statuette double équestre d'ancêtres. H.: 21" (53,35cm).

country favourable to cultural development. As with the great majority of African peoples, their art is closely bound to their religious beliefs and legends, and even their drinking cups and famous boxes have carved designs of symbolic meaning. These same designs are woven into the velvet-like fabric called "velour de Kasai" which continues to be made today. Their variety of masks, some beaded, others painted in vivid colours, are typical of the inventiveness and ingenuity of the African sculptor.

Apart from the wealth of sculpture, African tribal art includes vast quantities of other objects: tiny bronze weights in many forms, cast by the cire-perdu method, and used for the weighing of gold-dust; heddle pulleys, some of which achieve great beauty and elegance. There are the ceremonial batons in wood and hammered iron, intricately carved neck-rests, ivory and gold pendants, elaborate stools, and the magnificent doors, carved in high relief, of the Dogon and the Senufo. Not to mention the woven and printed textiles, used in conjunction with masks as a covering, and decorated with shells, beads and feathers.

Magic being the daily life of the African, it manifests itself in the making of fetishes and amulets, by the carver or fetisher who will create charms for a variety of purposes, in human or animal form, to suit whatever occasion his customer may have in mind. The "amateur" in African art is strictly speaking, not a "collector" in the sense one may apply the term to a stamp or coin enthusiast who acquires a special item to complete a set. Rather, African sculpture find its way into museum and private collections as single and individual objects of enjoyment and satisfaction. A lamentable tendency, however, in recent years, has been its purchase as a climbing financial investment, and while this has, of-course, awakened public interest, it has caused the rarer examples to climb way out of the range of any but the wealthiest patrons.

With this increasing demand, a growing industry has developed in Africa (and even Europe) where artisans are busily turning out large quantities of commercial sculpture, polished and with suitable termite damage. This finds its way into antique shops and auctions, where it is bought at low prices, although often prices climb to almost those obtained for the genuine article.

However, the expanding knowledge obtained through the many excellent books now available, enables the discerning buyer to distinguish between spurious objects and those created in the idiom of a particular tribe, and used by them for the purpose for which it was created.

These same books also deal with the civilisations existing in this rich continent before the arrival of the white man. If Africa were ever a "dark continent" it is surely only on account of our ignorance of the cultures of its peoples.

