

Art, Visual: (3) In Central Africa

Central Africa is defined as the vast area of forest and savannah that stretches from Cameroon (south of the Sanaga River) to Angola (the Cunene-Cuando-Cubango watershed). This region includes a huge diversity of peoples, cultures and arts in southernmost Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Congo Republic, the Central African Republic, Zaire and Angola. Some ethnic groups extend into the southern Sudan, western Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and northwestern Zambia.

Most populations inhabiting this region speak languages belonging to different branches of Bantu, but some are speakers of Ubangian and Nilotic. Artistic creativity in this region has reached the highest levels. It manifests itself not merely in widely distributed, extremely varied, sculptural traditions. This exuberant creativity is also apparent in many other sometimes inadequately studied fields of artistry, such as metalwork, ceramics, calabash engraving, drawings in sand and on walls, textiles, barkcloth, basketry, plaiting and matting, beadwork, architecture, body adornment, tattooing and cicatrization, music, dance, song, theatrical performance, and oral literature. Painting is intimately linked with sculpture, body adornment, mural and barkcloth decoration.

Moving from the Cameroon-Gabon boundaries to Zaire and Angola, following are the most important multi-ethnic clusters of great sculptural traditions: Fang and subdivisions (Ntumu, Okak, Betsi, etc.); Kuta (Kota); Kwele-Mahongwe; the Ogowe-Ngunie area (Punu, Tsogho etc.); the Ngbandi-Ngbaka and Bwa-Mangbetu-Zande-Nzakara-Yangere clusters of northern Zaire and southern parts of the Sudan and the Central African Republic; the numerous divisions of the Kongo peoples (Vili, Solongo, Woyo, Yumbe, Bembe, Bwende, etc.); the Teke cluster; the many more or less related populations (Yaka, Suku, Mbala, Pende, Hungaan or Waan, Holo, etc.) of the Kwango-Kwilu-Kasai areas in Zaire and Angola; the Cokwe and related groups (Lunda, Ndembu, Lwimbi, Lucazi, Sinji, Songo, etc) in Zaire, Angola and Zambia; the Kuba and relatives; the Songye subdivisions; the Luluwa; the Luba, Hemba and Luba-Hemba of southeastern Zaire; the Tabwa and kindred groups on Lake Tanganyika; the Bembe and Lega of eastern Zaire; some populations in the Ituri forest. Further down in Angola, there are the great traditions of the Imbangala, Ovimbundu and Ngangela. Each of the above-mentioned ethnic terms covers a large number of distinctive, more or less related artistic traditions. Obviously there are many more peoples famed for their outstanding artistic output, such as Ket, Binji, Salampasu, Ndengese, Zela, Komo, Pere, Mbole, Lengola in Zaire.

Of special significance for the entire area, is the cultural influence exercised by Pygmies (known under various names such as Babinga, Efe, Twa, Cwa, Mbuti). Still represented throughout the region in small scattered groups, the Pygmies have profoundly impacted in the areas of ritual and the musical and verbal arts.

Interspersed with zones of great sculptural traditions are ethnic groups whose artistic heritage is focused on other types of creative achievements. Among them are the Mongo-Ngombe-Poto-So-Topoke-Tetela-Hamba peoples in central Zaire, where the distinctive shapes of knives and swords (many of them used as exchange devices and as ceremonial and prestige items) have reached a climax of artistic inventiveness.

Given the immense diversity of artistic traditions and the unevenness, even inadequacy, of relevant scientific documentation it is impossible to propose valid generalizations about the dominant styles and the aesthetic motivations prevalent in these regions. No clear-cut distinctions between forest-dwelling and savannah populations can be found, nor can any precise correlations be established between art types and cultural types. Art flourishes in acephalous as well as in politically centralized groups, among patrilineal and matrilineal peoples. Outstanding sculptural traditions occur among peoples with value orientations centered in hunting and trapping as well as among those where

the economic and ideological focus is on agriculture. The sculptural arts flourish among populations with elaborate healing systems, initiation ceremonies and voluntary or semi-secret associations, as well as among those where such rituals are reduced or nonexistent.

Although there are numerous local morphological and stylistic continuities between and across diverse ethnic groups, the overall distinctiveness of the combined stylistic features and the overall physical appearance of the artworks in most cases is so striking that experts have no difficulty to differentiate figurines in the Fang style from those in Kongo style, or Pende masks from Yaka masks. For experts the stylistically different features are easily perceived in toto, but the detailed descriptions of them raise numerous problems. Take a visually well-definable figural art as that of the Fang. The detailed description of major morphological features at once reveals significant differences in the details of proportions, shape of the head, hairstyles, features of face, arms, legs, mouth, nose. These are partly linked with distinctive subethnic artistic traditions, probably with distinctive ateliers and trends in individual creativity. In addition, the distinctiveness of an ethnic artistic tradition is frequently a matter of recognizing specific types and categories of sculptures symptomatic of that culture. Of course, the difficulties encountered in describing the style characteristics of artworks

produced by closely related or territorially mixed groups and subgroups are even greater.

Generalizations are easier to make about recurring modes of usage, functions, and patterns of acquisition and ownership of the artworks, partly because Central African sculptures are made for well-defined contexts. But generalizations in the interpretation of meanings and symbolisms associated with the works often are very tentative because of the unique configurations of philosophical and value systems in which they are conceived.

Viewed in the perspectives of African and world art, some of the most extraordinary carving traditions flourish in this region. To mention a few: the bieri guardian figurines and heads of the Fang group, the bwete copper plated abstract guardian figurines of the Kuta-Mahongwe group, the white face masks of the Ogowe area, the nkisi and bwanga power figures of the Kongo and Songye groups, the incredibly variegated sculpted and constructed masks of the mukanda initiations, used in social control, power display, teaching and character dramas among peoples of the Kwango-Kwilu areas in Zaire and Angola, the sculptures of the hero Cibinda among the Cokwe, the ndop royal figurines of the Kuba, the ancestral figurines of the Luba and Hemba, the stylized miniature figurines ultimate symbols of Lega moral philosophy, the anthropomorphic batons of the Ovimbundu.

Early artistic evidence for the area is sparse. But in some parts there are rich burial grounds, such as the Upemba burial sites (6th century AD) or the domed and platform-shaped tumuli of Angola. Here and there one finds cave paintings. Early pottery traditions from Lower Zaire date back to the 3d century BC. In addition, it is commonly assumed that perhaps the oldest exstant zoomorphic wood sculpture (dated back to the ninth century) was found in Angola. Among the oldest sculptures available in early Western collections are the so-called Vallisnieri figurines dating back to the 17th century found near Kina on the southern limits of the Kongo kingdom, with no clear-cut stylistic affiliation, but thought to be of Kongo or Ambundu origin, some Afro-Portuguese ivories from the Kongo and some of the syncretistic Kongo art (early crucifixes in brass or copper; Saints' statues) and the so-called Afro-Portuguese ivories.

Few of the massive amount of sculptures available in Museums and private collections can be dated with any certainty beyond the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of the well documented early art pieces can only be assigned an ante quem date. However, there are hints in the oral traditions of various populations that the artistic heritage reaches far back in time. In addition the occurrence over wide distances of specific morphological features (e.g. the widespread heart-shaped, more or less concave face typical

for numerous figurative traditions; the cowrie-shaped eyes; the circle-dot design; the abdominal position of the hands, arms close to the torso) seems to indicate early common sources and contacts. The fragile materials used (including softwood), combined with numerous environmental hazards, the modes of preservation and the methods of transmission, acquisition, disposal and replacement of specific sculptures have not been favorable to the prolonged conservation of individual pieces . When a Lega initiate informs the researcher that an ivory figurine in his possession was acquired via various intermediaries from a kinsman who lived six generations ago, it is impossible to know whether he is referring to the specific object at hand or to a patrilineal line of prescribed transfers of the jural and ritual right to own such a piece.

Throughout the region the categories of artworks produced by any given ethnic group may include anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, hybrid and nonfigurative figurines and masks; musical instruments; neckrests, backrests and stools; bed panels; scepters and batons; axes and adzes; poles, panels, doors, lintels and boards; potlids; axes and adzes, shields, combs and pins, cups, boxes and mortars, divination instruments, paddles and canoes; coffins; spoons and ladles; knives, swords, spears and shields; pectorals and amuletic

and votive objects; bangles; pipes; miniature replicas of tools and weapons, and some other sculptures.

Wood (frequently prescribed types of soft wood) is the major medium for carving, but sculptures are also produced in ivory (e.g. Kongo, Pende, Lega) bone (Lega), horn, stone (Kongo), clay, terracotta, and metal (iron and copper). Ephemeral sculptures are made of various assemblages of wood, leaves, feathers, hides, beads, shells, cowries, etc. Still other materials are incorporated in the production of masks, many of which are not merely carved but assembled or constructed from leaves, grasses, fibers, bark, leather, shells, beaks, hide, feathers, resins, cloth. Striking assemblages, made of colored cloth and other materials, in the shape of large and small human and animal figurines are produced in some ethnic groups, but many of them are ephemeral creations that are not well preserved in collections and also not well known. Among these constructions, the most amazing are the giant painted cloth figurines containing the dried corpse of a leader among the Bwende subgroup of the Kongo and the smaller polychrome ones of the Bembe subgroup of the Kongo. .

Apart from common face masks mostly worn in vertical position, typical in various parts of this region are helmet masks and large construction masks that cover the entire head. Even many of the face masks have hats and

neckpieces that allow the entire head to be covered. Many masks show traces of red or white colors, but polychrome masks are restricted to some areas.

Most masks are anthropomorphic; zoomorphic, hybrid and amorphous masks are fairly rare; masks with superstructures (humans, animals, genre scenes) masquettes, and miniature masks occur in some areas.

Virtually all masks are associated with males; they are held in individual or collective ownership. Although in male possession some masks may be manipulated by women in ritual contexts. Most masks function in danced performances; they occur singly, in pairs or in larger groups, sometimes in fixed sequences. Some masks are too large and too heavy to be carried; these large masks may be associated with the ritual treasures of chiefs and other leaders, and be displayed on the eve of important rituals. Masquettes and miniature masks are used in unexpected ways (e.g. held in the hand, suspended from something, worn as a pendant). In performance, masks are inseparable from prescribed costumes, paraphernalia, specific dance movements, songs and music. Masks may have their guides and chaperones. Some masks appear during the day, others only at dusk or in the night; some never enter the village, but are visible in the bush at the outskirts of the settlements. In performance the masker may represent animals, nature spirits, ancestors, dead persons temporarily returning to the community, culture

heroes, legendary personages, exemplary or negative characters. The masker may reflect abstract concepts about authority, seniority, wealth, beauty, appropriate behavior, morality and philosophy. Masks may also function as emblems of rank and status. Masks can be the external symbols of the authority and ritual privilege of kings, chiefs, headmen, ritual office-holder, elders, high initiates. As such they do function as powerful elements of socio-political cohesion and legal control, settling disputes and fighting witchcraft and sorcery. Some function as symbols of internal solidarity and external autonomy of specific groups. Some masks are destined to inspire terror and fear and to allow types of action that are otherwise forbidden; other masks are gentle and playful. Some masks are silent, some have their own spokesman; others are noisy; talkative, quarrelsome, sarcastic; some sing or speak in a special voice sometimes aided by a kazoo that is fixed inside the mouth opening of the mask.

It is fair to say that a great many masks are primarily linked with initiation (be it the installation and enthronement rites of chiefs and other leaders, the “puberty” initiations of young men and women or initiations into specific cults and graded voluntary associations). Secondly, the masks occur in all vital events in which these persons are involved, such as political and legal control, rites of appeasement or funerary rituals. They constitute a powerful

element in the exercise of social control, using the widest spectrum of methods, from terror to imposition of fines and taboos, from parody and ridicule to play. Little is known about the intricate terminological systems by which masks are classified and the inherent meanings of the terms used. The elaborate naming systems of the Pende and Lega provide additional insights in ultimate meanings.

Mask styles may be radically different from the styles in which figurines are carved, pointing in some cases to autonomous traditions that are older and more widely distributed than figure sculpture.

Cephalomorphic and some anthropomorphic pottery is produced in several regions such as Kongo (Mboma, Solongo, Woyo), Eastern Luba, Kanyok, Mangbetu and related cultures, Lunda and Cokwe. These elaborate potteries may serve as containers for water, oil, beer, or to store precious belongings, but there are also special links with funerary and other rituals.

Anthropomorphic figurines range from full-standing, sitting, squatting and kneeling figures to half-figures, busts and heads. They represent males, females, hermaphrodites. Typical for some groups in the region are multi-faced and multi-headed figurines and dual statues showing a male and female placed back to back or standing or sitting next to each other.. Group sculptures are essentially limited to representations of women or men holding

a youthful person (the female figurines of this type are often referred to as mother-and-child statues). The youthful personage is sitting on the shoulders, carried on the back, held in one arm, sitting in the lap or clinging to the female body. Other figurines support the seat of a stool or hold some object (a sword, a cup). Some figures show no sex organs, yet different sex may be recognized from hairstyles, headdresses, body adornments including tattoos and cicatrizations; in other statues emphasis is placed on female or male sex organs (including some artificially induced deformations), some male sculptures are ithyphallic.

The styles in which figurines are carved range from fairly realistic naturalism and idealized realism to highly conventionalized and stylized forms and extreme abstraction. Some groups prefer rounded, curvilinear shapes, others give preference to angular forms, still others favor elongated, stocky or compact structures. Some adopt static hieratic poses, others are freer in gesture and movement. Whereas symmetrically and frontally conceived figurines prevail, there are enough examples where this rule is broken, in figurines with one or both arms raised or those turning away the head.

Typical throughout the area is the manner in which specific details have been rendered: particularly striking are the sumptuously carved hairdoes and headdresses, the intricate scarifications and tattoos, the necklaces and

bangles. Anthropomorphic figurines may be colored, partly or entirely, in white, red or black; many non-colored figurines have extraordinary patinas produced by the types of wood used, the oils with which the woods or ivories are rubbed, the constant manipulation. Typical among the figurines are those that are loaded with various additions, not merely paint, but hats, horns, mirrors, bangles, shells, pods, teeth, beads, iron objects (nails, daggers), medicinal ingredients stuffed in cavities, satchets or horns. Typical also are those statues that are encrusted with sacrificial matter (dried blood, resins, saps of certain plants).

Among the most striking recurring morphological features in this vast region are the concave heart-shaped faces; the size and refinement of the head often in contrast with the relative simplicity of the torso and legs; the arms close to the body holding the chin, the upper chest, the breasts, the abdomen; the relatively short bent legs.

Anthropomorphic figurines have wide-ranging functions in ancestral cults at various levels (personal, family, lineage and clan ancestors, dead chiefs, founders of dynasties and heroes); cults for nature spirits, for some divinities and twins. Some function as emblems of socio-political and ritual status; symbols of ritual privilege, tokens of socio-political cohesion and solidarity; containers of forces to heal and to protect the individual and the

group (against witchcraft, infertility, sickness and other calamities), or to revenge wrongs and to inflict harm, to take oaths and to curse, to devine. Figurines may have didactic and mnemonic functions associated with values, moral and philosophical principles expressed in aphorisms, legends, tales, myths. Most importantly, many figurines tend to be multifunctional, operating at various levels of the socio-political and ritual structure, and their symbolisms tend to be multivocal, a multivocality that is linked with stages of knowledge.

Zoomorphic figurines, sculpted in various materials, are fairly rare and range from realistically rendered animals to abstract representations that deliberately cover the identity of the animal. Outside the context in which they occur it is even difficult to precisely identify more realistically carved animals. It must be noted, however, that numerous animals are represented by various constructions or assemblages comprising parts of the real animals (hides, claws, scales, teeth, feathers, beaks). Animal figurines occur in initiations, divination, healing rites, nature spirits cults.

Among the other sculptures some of the highest levels of artistic achievement can be found. Special mention should be made of Luba caryatid neckrests and stools, Pende miniature pectoral masks in ivory or other materials, Kongo ivory and wooden anthropomorphic finials for scepters, Kongo-

Yumbe figured bed panels, Zande anthropomorphic sanzans and Mangbetu harps, Kuba cephalomorphic cups and wooden lidded boxes of varied shapes covered with intricate design patterns, Lega spoons in ivory or bone, Mangbetu hairpins, Cokwe and Ngangela combs topped with human heads or full figures, anthropomorphic wood and bark boxes of the Mangbetu, Cokwe Imbangala and Ovimbundu pipes with long decorated stems. Throughout the region great artistic care is found in the treatment of musical instruments, from sanzans to harps, membranophone drums to slit-drums, from whistles to trumpets. Many of these instruments are exquisitely enhanced with geometrical designs, human heads, busts and full figures. Most of these extraordinary carvings are items of privilege, status and prestige, owned by chiefs, headmen, various dignitaries, members of associations and cults. As such some of these artworks form an intrinsic part of royal treasures, of the power houses of healers, diviners and other ritual experts. They represent extremely significant symbols of continuity, power and authority, and are inseparable from initiation, enthronement and renewal rites.

In most cases the possession of artworks is not a question of a free market in which one makes a personal, arbitrary acquisition of objects one likes or would like to have as a proof of artistic taste, wealth, prestige and status. The majority of artworks are commissioned by and for specific categories of

persons whose position in the socio-political and ritual system demands the acquisition of specified artworks, frequently not as sole possessors but as trustees and guardians for a kinship, political or ritual community.

Artists did not sign their works. Oral traditions have recorded few names of great artists. Because of the random manner in which the Westerners collected African artworks and the belated emphasis on scientific research of African art, it is no simple matter to correlate known names with particular artworks or to correlate available documented or undocumented sculptures with particular ateliers. The so-called anonymity is due to many factors: the function of the artwork, the social position of the artist within his group, the absence of classes, castes or guilds of craftsmen; the modes of commissioning, the emphasis placed on the product and the user rather than the maker. Also, the boundaries between artist and artisan are not clearly drawn; the creative person is still very much an artifex. Some great sculptors were also ordinary craftsmen and cultivators or hunters. Experts on particular arts have recently attempted, with varied results, to associate on stylistic grounds certain groups of artworks with particular artists, local ateliers and regional schools. Some of these efforts are severely limited by the lack of adequate ethnographic information on specific ethnic groups and subgroups, and the absence of adequate biographical data on artists. In many ethnic

groups artworks and the pertinent carving traditions have travelled because of exchanges between groups and the movements of individuals and kinship units, and the subsequent effects on the distribution of particular styles or substyles is not well known.

At different periods in the twentieth century and with varied results, many of the great artistic traditions of Central Africa have eclipsed. The reasons for this decline are numerous and complex. In general the processes of colonialism and evangelization, and subsequent socio-political, economic and ideological transformations (including the development of prophetic and messianic movements and syncretistic cults) have been unfavorable to the maintenance of vigorous art traditions. Many of the art-producing and art-using institutions were often the immediate target of colonial and missionary actions that aimed at the eradication of the systems within which the arts operated. Direct colonial action ignored the intimate link between Central African art, society and religion. Without the underlying value system and the supporting set of institutions many arts became totally meaningless to their makers and users.

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