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AFRICAN ART AND MYTH

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C.M. TILL

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African art and myth

The spiritual and material understanding of the world and its life force is a pre-occupation of man.

Myth, clothing and brutal and naked beauty of ¹
primeval thought with the dignity of tradition
and the majesty of sacredness exerts a singular
attraction upon the human mind, civilized and
sophisticated as well as simple and untutored.
The mixture of incompatible extremes of the
shameful and the Holy, the graceful and the raw,
the fleshy and the spiritual, the tragic and the
clownish, surrounds myth with an atmosphere of
mystery and gives it a meaning which has always
inspired the artist and puzzled the student.

Myth, like art, has been subjected to interrogation, investigation
and misrepresentation in order to establish what is meant by
individual myth.

There are theories which make folk law ²
into a muddled natural science and the psycho-
analytic interpretation which make myth into
daydreams charged with incestuous desire,
opinions which consider legends as but a slightly
mangled tribal history, and others which make
myth the outcome of unbridled imagination.

Campbell states that man should be able to construct out of myths
a true and unified and spiritual picture because they contain
man's supreme lessons of the past, they tell us how to live and
know. Myth reveals the truth. Art is truth. Art and myth
reveal the mysteries and truths of life.

Wherever the poetry of myth is inter- ³
preted as biography, history or science it
is killed.

Historians

Historians are concerned with relics and digging up the dead. With the help of scientists, archeologists and carbon 14, they endeavour to establish when, where and how many. Art and myth establish the fact and the life beyond any doubt. Science is digging again, this time on Mars. Digging for what? Life?

History belongs to History books, to be read and forgotten, while the lesson learnt is to get on with life rather than time/life.

One can only hope for the rediscovery of enduring values in myth if men develop a sensibility to myth. The life force is constantly being reborn through myth and art. In African life and thought the knowledge of the life force is very much in evidence. It is constantly being relived and recreated. There is no finality and no death. Death is an extension of life.

"In Africa it seems as if the whole of human life is contained within the mythical framework, as if the difference between the sacred and profane no longer exists"

Myth and art is an integral part of the existence of primitive peoples. Canack mythology of new Caledonia shows this interpretation.

It is a collection of acts of participation⁵
between man and nature, woman and the totem,
between money and the liharna creeper, as if the
individuals were indisociable from things and were
still one with society and the cosmos,

The interpretation of myth, art and life is the heart. Western philosophy dictates the separation of these in order to butcher them individually. African life and culture is a cosmology and is structured to a rigid pattern.

All events, day to day happenings and occurrences are related with an intimate contact with the Creator. Between God and Man stands life.

African art is the reflection of African ⁶ philosophy. This image of the world is expressed in African culture. Any piece of African art in its expression and content is a medium for making visible the connection inherent in this philosophy. Consciously or subconsciously the work of art is thus an example of the re-adjustment of actual life to the demands of the philosophical system.

Recent studies of African thought and philosophy have revealed the Africans understanding of his own vital force. In African thinking the universe is filled with life forces. Objects also have living forces. These may be grouped and are inter-related yet independent of one another. The first group KAGAME is called MUNTU and encompasses all the forces able to think, and having the power of the magic word which has an influence on everything. "Magic" said Levi, "is the traditional science of the secrets of nature." These forces include deceased man, spirits and Gods. The second group KINTU includes animals, plants and what could be called objects, table, chairs and so on. The third group is the HANTU. This contains all localising forces. The unity of time and space. The fourth is the KUNTU group. These are the forces of why and how things happen. All these forces are under the command of the first group, namely, MUNTU. Therefore, it is possible for every MUNTU force to control any KINTU force. Living man could command the mountain to move, provided he had the magic word. In the modern Western world, KINTU, or the world of objects, has enormous importance, Mercedes and swimming-pools. In African society the KUNTU world has importance. How things are done rather than what. The object is less important than the manner of doing.

African sculpture is at the service of religion and society. This is true to the degree that the sculpture has the functional value of acting as a medium for the forces during the

sacred rite. A life force is reborn and revitalised through the enactment of a ritual. The god, or ancestor, finds a receptacle for its power. The rite and the magic word become important. The various initiation rites which introduce the initiates to the manner of understanding, form part of the magical function. The sculptor does not just hack out a piece, but has to be admitted to these rites which are essential, before commencement of the work. The African lives in a hostile world where various spirits, gods, and forces have to be appeased and recognised. Art lives in his society and has power in that society. It is highly complexed. On one level it constitutes the means of recording materially, and records knowledge of every order, Religious, Mythological, political, social and cosmological. Various ideograms proclaim a whole system of ideas which can be read on the artistic object. Dogon sculpture is a specific example of this. The number of bracelets and rings may represent an entire cosmology.

African religion, as does many other 'primitive' religions, recognises numerous lower gods in addition to the creator god. It is a polytheistic society. The creator is not normally portrayed but is far distant. The lower gods have a direct influence on the man and his welfare. The secret rite and magic is the application of natural forces put at his disposal for increasing his own vitality. He understands these forces which are essential to his existence. The "ancestor" image serves to link past and present. The African is linked to the other world and the life force is transferred to the possessor of the image, which is considered to be living.

"African art is the visual representation of the ⁷
invisible and the transcendental."

In ASHANTI society the people believe the religious ceremonies are important because men interact not only with one another but with their ancestors, gods and spirits. This interaction

is made possible because man himself is made of material and non-material elements. He has a body formed out of the blood of his mother, a spirit partly derived from his father and a soul given to him by a supreme being.

There is a close connection between the dead and the material representation in art of the recreation. The origins of the human being is represented in a double process. In animals the animal is born and the body unites with the shadow and the result is a living animal. When the animal dies the shadow disappears and the body decays. In humans, on the one hand, is the biological union of the body and shadow. At the same time there exists the NOMMO force which unites with the body to form body and spirit. The idea of this union is called MAGARA: life. When a man dies his body and shadow disappear but his spirit (the MAGARA) remains. This is the NOMMO life force. The importance of "ancestor" worship is understood by virtue of the fact that the NOMMO force is passed down to the existing generation. The life force is reborn in living humans.

The African lives in close harmony with nature. He is dependent on the crops he grows and the animals he tends. The welfare of his home and family depends on the natural phenomena. These, the rain, thunder, fire are retold in myth. The animals, both wild and domestic have certain meaning and are respected accordingly. African myth differs from region to region and religion to religion but the great changes are matched only by the great change in the meaning of myth in African thought. He understands why the leopard is spotted and why the hyena laughs. He has the "Whole world in his head"⁸ Art is part of his relationship to the natural world. Nature cannot be imitated but is experienced through myth and art. History has no significance for him. The truths are truths now as they were yesterday. The rain falls because of the tears shed through

the cruelty of Obassi Nsi or whoever it might be.

"It is not how men think the myths but how the myths think themselves out in men." 9

Myth is the basis of African culture throughout this sub continent.

"Every age has a definite picture of all past events ¹⁰ accessible to it, a picture peculiar to itself. Legend is not one of the forms, but rather the only form in which we can imaginatively consider and relive history. All history is saga and myth." This outlook is also found in Chinese Toaism and Japanese Shintoism. Nature and not man is the measure of all things.

Major African sculpture is not found throughout Africa, but mostly in the river systems of the Niger and the Congo. This has been explained by the classification of peoples into pastoralists and hunters. The hunter is on the move and has little leisure time to sculpt. He reaps without sowing. The pastoralist remains in one place and does have this time. Yet the hunter realizes the relationship between human society and the natural world, the birds, fish and animals which exist in it constitute the domain of the incontrollable. The hunt often resembles an initiation ceremony. The hunter enters into a relationship with and inhabits the natural world. His mode of thought, as well as art, is dominated by animals, which he sees as equal or even superior to himself. He makes no distinction between man and beast.

Man may take the form of an animal, as an animal may take the form of man. In his art human beings appear as animals and hybrid beings, as they did in Egypt and among the Eskimo. The domain of the uncontrollable and mysterious is approached, met and revealed.

The Australian Aborigine believes himself to be descended from the kangaroo. Man and beast as one flesh. He is part of the natural world and understands its workings. Though no sculpture is produced by these people, rock paintings and engravings show his ways and beliefs.

Ape, cock and snake, iron, copper and gold ¹¹
 tree, grass and stone belong to the category
 KINTU- things. The ore all collectively
 BINTU, things, forces without intelligence

In African philosophy it is the earth, not god, that bears the fruit. It is not only sowing and reaping which puts the fruit at man's disposal. The seed has no activity of its own and does nothing without the influence of man. The word has tremendous power. The NOMMO, the life force, influences "things" in the shape of the word.

The NOMMO is water and heat. The vital force ¹²
 that carries the word issues from the mouth
 in a water vapour which is both water and the
 word.

NOMMO is water, fire, seed and word in one. The life force gives life to everything.

The good word, as soon as it is received by ¹³
 the ear goes directly to the sex organs where
 it rolls about the uterus just as the copper
 spiral rolls about the sun. That word of
 water brings and maintains the moisture
 necessary to procreation and by this means
 NOMMO brings about the penetration of the
 uterus by a germ of water. It transforms into
 a germ the water of the word and gives it the
 appearance of a human person through the essence
 of the NOMMO."

Man has by the force of his own word, power, over "things" that is KINTU. He can change them, make them work for him and command them through the word. But to command things with words is to

practice magic. To practice word magic is poetry and poetry is myth, myth is truth and art is truth.

The magic of change never stops. NOMMO, the word creates images and transforms them. All change reveals the flowing of forces. NOMMO as Ogdommeli says, is moisture fluidity, word, seed, blood and water. The African poet does not express his relation to nature but places nature (KINTU) at his disposal and his service, rouses it into life and uses it. His poetry does not describe nature it uses nature and shows a new reality which could show the future or the past. The past is a pattern for the future, for it contains the wisdom of the ancestors, the knowledge of the order which is to shape the present.

In Western poetry the word proceeds the image. The image being the ideas. In African poetry the word is there before the image. The NOMMO, the life, the word, creates the image. Before that there is KINTU, which through the power and the wisdom of the word is transformed into an image. The African artist is concerned with the NOMMO, the power of the word to express the meaning of nature, the nature of life.

Even the material used for sculpture has the knowledge and power of the NOMMO, because it comes from the road of the invisible ones. "The tree is the vertical that unites the water NOMMO of the depths, with the cosmos."¹⁴ It is the seat of the gods and has a value and a life. The word transforms it into an ideogram of the spirit and the NOMMO.

Jung points out that the difference between a sign and a symbol.

The sign is always less than the concept¹⁵
it represents, while a symbol always stands
for something more than its obvious and
immediate meaning.

African sculpture could be called a symbol of African beliefs, fears and hopes. It embodies African philosophy.

The myth in primitive society, that is in ¹⁶
its original living form, is not a mere tale
told but a reality lived.

Jung talks of the repetition of symbols in dreams which could be called mythical and are racial or universal. These are irrational and formless. Myth is ordered and comprehensible and the primordial images show themselves here.

Myth forming structural elements must be ¹⁷
present in the unconscious psyche.

The primordial images are not myths themselves but the components of myth.

Jung holds out the theory of a collective unconscious.

The symbols of the self arise in the depths ¹⁸
of the body, corpus et anima, the deeper layers
of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness
as they become increasingly collective until they
are universalized and extinguished.

The more archaic and deeper or psychological the symbol is, the more collective, universal and material it becomes. The myths are not invented but are experienced. They are the mental life of the 'primitive' tribe which immediately falls to pieces and decays when it loses its mythological 'heritage'.

Jung suggests we put our faith in something which is forever indefinable, a host of symbols revealed through secret myth, whose nucleus is mysterious and irreducible. We should not seek to lead fully conscious lives he says, and suggests the reacquaintance with the truth and life force. In other words with art. This African philosophy practises. He is identified with myth which plays an integral part of his existence. His sculpture

in part is the living symbol of these myths. Besides originating from the unconscious, myth carry idealogical and spiritual concepts as well. They provide the source of the creative impulse through understanding.

The understanding of the 'seat' of life and the centre of the world changes from civilization to civilization. The Greeks and the Omphalie - the navel, the Babilonians - the liver, the centre may be in Siberia where the white youth of the Yalcuts is born, or under the Bo tree where the Buddha sits or in Mecca with its black stone, or in the circle drawn by the Pawnee Indians, or the place where Wotan died or at Calvary. For the African the word is magical, and his soul is in his breath. His vital centre is his head, his myth and religion are spiritualized, bodiless.

"He has the whole word in his head". 19

The African artist is bound by traditions and familiar pattern symbols or ideograms, they are repeated generation after generation. As Gide put it "A work of art is the product of selection and discipline". In Africa the selection is the transference of the Magara or the NOMMO life force, to the next generation by way of 'ancestor' worship. The discipline is the strong tribal tradition. This tribal tradition is sometimes believed to be limiting, but it is fact not limiting at all. It is in keeping with the thought power of the African artist. The collective conscious of Jung.

The symbol is not a sign but a known spirit or myth symbol. It embodies the NOMMO life force which is understood. The individual handling is sufficiently far removed from the architype to be less than limiting. The individual will leave his mark and his personal interpretation, and has gone beyond

the religious limitation, and the emphasis is shifted from the preservation of power to the perpetuation of power. The image has an expressive quality which embodies what is fundamentally important. The co-ordination of skill and emotional tension which is embodied in the soul of the people is realized in a unity of form. The traditional and symbolic forms allows his audience who share the same background and beliefs to communicate with the soul and see and feel the life embodied in it.

The African artist is a professional. He does not suffer the fate of specialized vision but approaches his subject with an open mind and with an understanding of the workings of life. He is equipped with the necessary knowledge and understanding to realize and fulfil his obligation to his society and his god, without being subservient to either. The natural world of which he is part, is fully realized. All aspects of art are included in his thinking, including music and poetry, whose rhythms and strengths are within his understanding. He continues going back to his origin, to the source, and recreates the life force. He does not fall foul of scientific and inartistic thought. He forms a union with his subject and is able to produce a symbol which has meaning and force. His ideas are ordered into this meaning. The figures, animal and symbols which are found in every aspect of African life all contain his idea of the real world. The life NOMMO lives through him and through art. That the creation of the universe differs from tribe to tribe is of no consequence, or that an animal to one is taboo to another. The essential philosophy of the African enables him to think and live 'artistically'.

He is able to simplify without impoverishment and works with truth to and through his material. The most common material

used is wood, which we know is a KINTU but a privileged one as it embodies its own power. The magical life is said to be seen in the grain and the shape of the wood, which the artist keeps intact. The power in the wood is allowed to dictate some of its own form. He produces a meaningful symbol which mirrors his knowledge. It can be shown as a decoration or as a religious object such as a mask directed to influencing the world of the spirits in a dance, or ritual, or the symbol which decorates a Yoruba doorpost. The knowledge of life is embodied in both. The African is both artist and magician.

The rhythm of life threads its way through African art. Singing and dancing has an important place in ritual and is often included in the making or the formation of art. The work is often shaped out to rhythm. Fako Gulibaby a Samorho sculptor from the Sikoss region, only sculpts at night and accompanies the sound of his tools as it strikes the wood, with songs which must not be interrupted. To transgress this rite would mean the ruin of the work.

The sculptor used an adze to chop out the work and this tool becomes part of his body, an extension of his arm. He identifies himself with the work and has been bound to its source through his philosophy, and the various ceremonies and initiation rites. The ceremony when the tree is felled, the application of dyes are all part of his action of creating the symbol which contains the truth of his being and existence.

"Negro art? Don't know it" Picasso used this reply when asked if his work had been influenced by Negro art. There is art. To sub-divide and dissect art into African, Oceanic, Romantic, Expressionistic, Impressionistic is to compartmentalize the whole.

Fifty years ago, when so-called African art burst into the scene in Europe, it caused a major stir. It was suddenly recognised that within the so called dark continent an art tradition had been flourishing for centuries. Until this time, everything brought back from Africa had been placed in museums and forgotten by all except ethnologists.

In 1905, Vlaminck was given a mask, and he records how Derain was speechless when he saw it. Derain brought it back and showed it to Picasso and Matisse. Ambroise Vollard bought it and had it cast in bronze. Braque and Gris became aware of African art. BANG! Suddenly so called new horizons open ... blah blah. Of course these people reacted to African art. It returns to the roots of their own existence. It returns them to the origin. Levi Strauss understands this when he talks of the collective unconscious of the human mind, which applies to all cultures and all races. The distinction between nature and culture largely disappears. Men converse with animals or marry animal spouses. They live in the sea or the sky. Levi Strauss' ultimate concern is with "the unconscious nature of the collective phenomena".

The Western mind is overlaid with school, university and scientific thought, and has forgotten his true nature and the universal logic of primitive thought. He has degenerated into specialist thought like specialist art. The world is no longer in his head, it crowns his head.

The reaction to African art was one of understanding. Because certain simplifications similar to African art appeared in Picasso's painting it was immediately labelled as 'African influence.' It was not. It was African, Celtic, Oceanic, Primitive, Folk,

Iberian, in fact, life influence. The common denominator was Art, and was recognized as such. Of course the new phenomena was dissected, and the Cubists spoke of the 'architectronic' character and the 'how' of African art, and the Expressionists looked at the emotional content, the 'what', at the same time mixing romantic, mystic notions of their own into their so called interpretations. But this is to be expected.

The few, however, realized that the life force the African creates is the important aspect and is universal. The sculpture had validity, not because it looked like, but because it did not look like an object or model known to them. It had its own life. Picasso said - "When the form is realized, it is there to live its own life."

African sculpture exists through the invented forms, used for their own meaning and not to copy natural forms.

The creation of a work of art, the growth of ²⁰ the crown of the tree must of necessity, as a result of entering into the specific dimensions of the pictorial art, be accompanied by the distortions of the natural form. For therein is nature reborn.

While the so called moderns were seeking expression of the inner self and were revolting against the accepted, conventional art forms, the African artist had already produced works in such complete freedom.

The artist must have something to say. The formulation of art is the expression mainly of unformulated ideas, and unconscious feeling or knowledge. The mind retains emotion and experiences. Picasso said that if he knew, if he were conscious of what he intended to express in his work, he would not have created it.

It is like the tension of expressing the as yet unknown to him but that which is within the inner self. That which is formalized.

It often happens that subject matter serves as a vehicle, symbol, or occasion for introducing or concealing the real content, the unconscious feeling. A medium best suited to carry the message is selected. This is the point of departure. From this the rhythms of creation introduces associations through which drives the impulse and the life force hidden in the unconscious. The truths are looked for and revealed in the conscious from the unconscious.

The African who lives and is disciplined by his tradition, who is aware of his soul and unconscious compulsion has the advantage. His Western counterpart is conscious of being an artist and is too often unconscious of art. The African artist with his totalised vision, represented in a totalised symbol which has meaning for his audience, renews the life force. As the snake sheds and renews its skin. A renewed contact with the source, the tradition, the collective unconscious will have the revolutionary significance which seems to be associated with the arrival of African art.

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The great civilized basis of our human sensibility must be reached in a violent, or anyhow, rapid return to nature.

The artist must return to the source. The validity of tradition depends on its retention of the elements of sensibility. If Poussin has these elements return to Poussin. The duality of the nature of things, the inner and the outer realities is a concern of the artist. The outer realities of the Western artist change at an alarming rate, and the downfall of his sensibility is the representation of this outer superficial 'unreality'.

The outer reality of the traditional African artist does not change to the same degree. When it does, when the Western civilization arrives to 'civilize' the structure breaks down. The source of his life is far closer to him than it is to the Western mind. His soul and his belief is more tangible. The myth which forms part of his existence is the reality ... the inner reality. When the reality becomes imitated then there no longer exists a basis for understanding. 'Realities Nouvelles', the new reality, profounded by some as being in no way based on the past, in other words, the source or the collective unconscious, but as an art of creation, in the divine sense of the word, are following the outer reality of Western civilization and the gimmicky inartistic thought, which goes with it.

Picasso said: "Our knowledge influences our vision."

He was what Sarte would call a revolutionary man.

A contingent being, unjustifiable, but free, entirely immunized in the society which oppresses him, but capable of transcending this society by his efforts to change it.

Picasso understands, as does the African artist, the life symbol. He is able to generate a meaningful symbol in a world of stale images and signs which no longer pierce the consciousness to express reality. The power is from the unconscious.

The only way humanity can help artists ²²
is to remain independent and work unconsciously.
We need the unconsciousness of humanity their
animalism and dreams.

Chagall reveals the use of symbolism and shows he is not a slave to symbolism.

My symbolic poetry is unexpected, oriental, situated between China and Europe, but it is not necessary to stress its symbolism.

He is not concerned with a sign or image. The symbol is not consciously strived for. A work by Chagall finds its fulfilment in a spiritual reality. He calls this the other reality; unreality or super-reality. He draws from beyond of a reality and finds the true reality.

Chagall, being a Jew from Eastern Europe, and being the son of parents who were Hasidic, a revival movement founded in the 18th Century, by the mystic Baal, Shom-Tov, was aware of the Hasidic spirit. Hasidism is linked to the mystic interpretation of the Bible. It is a mystic psychology.

In himself when he descends into the ²³
depths of his own being, man proves all the
dimensions of the universe.

The Hasid in its emotion is as important as the law or the ritual. The symbol embodies his understanding of this which he arrives at through his search.

Every action implies a reaction, ²⁴
every construction a destruction.

Sedar Sendar, an African poet wrote that

African art is a palpable contact with the
underlying realities of the universe.

The so called influence of African art on Europe was nothing more than a recognition of ART by the few, and the exploitation of new expression and 'influence' by the many, who used it as a fashion, and to suit their own ends.

Costeau who viewed African art as a separate, compartmentalized aestheticism, 'bravely' denounces the 'African Crisis' as something as boring as Japonism, showing the extent of the real non-influence and his own non-understanding of it.

The so called isolation of African art is a comparatively recent thing. The finding of stone implements of Paleolithic and Neolithic style, points to the time of the early inhabitants. The theory is advanced that the prehistoric invasion came in three waves. A white invasion, which occupied successively Ethiopia, Egypt and North Africa. A black invasion - which mixed neither with the whites of the north, nor with the pygmies, and established itself around the Equator to form the present Bantu people, and a second black invasion which reached the Sudanese plains and the Guinea Coast, forming the Sudanese and Guinean Negro groups. The Bushmen and the Hamites might have constituted the original inhabitants.

Herodotus, in the 6th Century B.C. described the circumnavigation of Africa by the Phoenicians. The Carthaginians later touched Senegal and Guinea. From the 9th to the 19th Century A.D. powerful negro states flourished on the Sudanese plains along the coastal regions and in the Congo. Reference to these appear in the Arabic literature. The Venetian Cadeunosto published a document on the African West coast in 1457. Later a document on the travels of a Portuguese Monk Fra Puarte, published a book which made first mention of African 'idols'. It is believed that the Normans were the first Europeans to reach Guinea. Then came the Portuguese in 1470.

So the question has been posed. Is African art indigenous or is it derivative? Leo Frobenius was the first to advance the theory that Negro art may have been influenced by the Mediterranean cultures from beyond the Sahara Desert. Theories of Egyptian influence and similarities are profounded. Comparisons of religious beliefs which are common and therefore give mutual influence are given.

Comparisons and similarities of fetishism, anamism, totemism with Greece are made. The intimacies between God and Man compared to the African totem, animal and man.

We are told of how Greek sculptors wandered as far as Afghanistan, to create the Gondhara style and asked if it were not possible that some accompanied the caravans to IFE, and the Phoenicians built Zimbabwe.

All these are only theories and only serve to prove the strength of African art. Derivative art shows decadence and African art is not decadent.

African art absorbed many influences without succumbing to them. The strength, energy and the Africans outlook on the world is and was far stronger than any formal influence. He digested the imported forms and made something new out of them. African art stood on its own and radiated life and the truth of the dual reality.

The basic tradition and the life revealing myth, were all powerful.

With the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries, the African polythesiest religion gained one more god. The symbol of the cross was often used in decoration. The all powerful thought and belief excepted the new god into its system, and continued to be vital and potent.

With the influx of the white man in force with his stronger magical power, and with the break down of African and tribal belief their art was deprived of its life elements. The fertile ground of the myth thought which enabled it to grow, withered and

died. The NOMMO was no longer all powerful. Dehumanising and unartistic scientific thought destroyed the contact the traditional African had with his past and his future. African nationalism, power slogans and the transistor radio has now become the new reality. BANG! End of African art.

Africa is going through the labour pains of a new African art. The manifestation of Shona sculpture can be seen as a part of this new movement. There is no record of the Shona peoples producing any sculpture before the arrival of white settlers and missionaries.

It was not a traditional undertaking. Other than making gold bracelets, bangles and earrings, basketry and the weaving of cloth, nothing was produced. Traditionally the first Shona group established themselves in the area of Zimbabwe. The Kingdom of Monomatapa flourished as a vast region south of the Zambezi River, with Zimbabwe as the focal point of development. Ancient maps of Monomatapa show that it was so vast that it extended northwards as far as Zambia's Barotseland border, west into the land of Botswana, East to Mocambique and south to the Transvaal, in South Africa. One of the earliest maps was dated 1528. The best map was compiled by an Italian and published in 1623. The original copy is to be found in the archives of the Vatican in Rome. The map shows the kingdom of Monomatapa dominating the whole of Southern Africa.

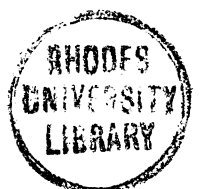
The people were by and large descendents of the great Monomatapa himself, and were called the Makaranger, and considered themselves the children of the sun believing their king to have been god appointed. Other tribes were absorbed into their society to form a large nation of extended tribal units known collectively as the

Vatapa, which would be the same collective group as, say, the Anglo Saxons. These people built Zimbabwe and not the Phoenicians or any other prehistoric culture as Cecil John Rhodes and others believe.

Traditionally the first Shona group, the Mbire, established themselves in the area of Zimbabwe and introduced the worship of the supreme god Mwari, and cults of Mhandora, associated with the ruling dynasties. Mwari was said to be particularly revered in Zimbabwe and reports state the close association of the Eastern Enclosure on the hill which contains religious and possible ancestral emblems, including those of Chamunuka, one of the most important Mhandora spirits. The Torwa dynasty is also reported to have supported Mhandora cults.

The Mbire have been seen to be an emergent group in the early 14th Century. We know that these people have been living in around Zimbabwe for a long time.

The Zimbabwe birds are of interest. Seven soapstone birds and the lower half of an eighth were found in Zimbabwe and nothing like them has been found anywhere else. The hunter, Posselt, in 1889, saw four of these birds in the Western Enclosure, which fits the lower half now in the museum Für Volkerkunde in Berlin. Hall found the last bird in the so called Phillips Ruin in the valley. All the birds are about 14 inches high and carved from green grey soapstone. The only complete example have what has been described as an incised lip rather than a beak. The sculptures are said to represent all kinds of birds among them parrots, hawks, vultures, fisheagles and crowned horn-bills. The most generally accepted theory is that they represent the Chapungu bird which is also the Shona's divine messenger.



There have been various unsupported theories and stories of secret caves concealing numerous and varied ancestor figures carved in stone which are sacred and not for the eyes of the uninitiated, but all attempts to link the Zimbabwe birds to Shona religion and present day Shona sculpture have been unsuccessful. The Shona people have no real understanding of the origin of the birds. The Bushman, on the other hand, who is accredited with the Bushman painting and drawings, have a knowledge of these works. When asked about them they reply that the 'old ones' were responsible. They themselves have lost the manner of doing these paintings but know that their ancestors were responsible, as this is revealed in their oral tradition.

The Shona people have a polytheistic religious outlook and the world of ancestor spirits is one of importance, as with other African societies. He believes in the existence of a creator but does not often pray directly to him. The existence of a number of powerful tribal spirits believed capable of producing rain, ensuring good crops, and the essential blessing to the land, require careful recognition and prayer. Ritual and sacrifice take their part and the creation of themselves and the universe and all animals is told in myth. The dance is important as it induces the medium into a state of trance in which he is able to communicate with his gods and ancestors. The medium plays a big part in the society. Shona religious beliefs are based on a strict code or etiquette which is understood by everyone present. Western civilization and its achievements have not deflected the Shona from his attachment with his guardian spirit and the forces which control his life. Those who profess Christianity hesitate to deny their conviction that the departed spirit has great influence over their lives. Tradition is held onto by the conservative tribal African and new ideas often encounter opposition among the more tribal African. The underlying belief remains strong in these people.

Painting and sculpture was encouraged by various missionaries at mission stations but nothing of any importance emerged.

The Workshop School of The National Gallery of Rhodesia, in Salisbury, began a more direct approach and provided facilities and materials. The outcome was amazing. The Shona appear to have an inherent understanding of art. Their belief and (physical life, live in sympathy as it does in other African societies. The tradition and energy of their own lives is enmeshed in much of the work. They show an understanding of nature and the natural world. They appear to have a universal creative ability drawn from the unconscious knowledge. Their sensibility has not been diluted by Western insensibility.

The sculpture unlike traditional sculpture serves no part in religious and social life yet there exists this common understanding and sensibility. The Shona has drawn from his origin and used his sensibility and understanding of LIFE. The truth and the knowledge of myth is drawn from, and is not borrowed.

There appears to be no reason for them to sculpt other than to express the magical belief within them. The work has undergone considerable change since the workshop first began. Works with names like 'The Great Insect God' and 'Skeleton Antelope Man' which showed the first associations with myth and traditional tribal beliefs have given way to less obvious but perhaps stronger meaning.

The Shona has an understanding of the way of life and how things happen. All aspects of human life, marriage, birth, creativity falls within the province of his mystical thought and belief and are translated in aspects of his art. His translation of the invisible and spirit world which surrounds him and of which he is an interacting part.

There are recurrent themes and spirits which are portrayed. The TSYRO is often shown as a hybrid creature of man and animal, reminiscent of the idea of Egyptian hybrid gods. As in Thoth, who had the head of an ibis or sometimes a baboon, or Osiris, who often took the form of a bull, and his sister-wife, Isis who is a hawk. Baboon man is often shown in Shona sculpture. A theme which goes through Africa to Egypt. The all seeing eye from which no action escapes, and the ZUZU and HAKA, both hostile and in fact who are the SHAVE or alien spirits are represented. The tree theme is important to the Shona, called the Muchacha, this is the ancestral tree from which the eye of the ancestors stare.

If asked where he seeks, the Shona replies that he sees images in dreams. The meaning is in his dreams and his mind. The symbol of his understanding comes from the unconscious. The images of the dreams are far more vital and potent than their waking counterparts. In conscious thought the restraints hold back the power of the dream and the truth and the insight which it contains.

'Our psyche is part of nature and its enigma is limitless' 25

The Shona is able to associate the psyche association that every idea and object and animal has. He is able to see and feel this because he is not burdened with Western pre-selection which leads to an artificial life far from the instincts of nature and its truth. He is still aware of his natural surroundings and aware of his ultimate desination. He has the knowledge of himself.

- 26 The degree of directness of the images presented in dreams and mythologies is, to say the least, very much the same. In this respect, dreams and mythologies are nearer to one another than dreams and poetry.

The attitude of mind of the Shona sculpture is essentially the same as the traditional African artist, Picasso or Chagall.

It is not after nature I am painting but before nature, with it. - Picasso.

The involvement of man with nature finds the character of nature forced onto him. The character is the interpretation of the dream myth, which is the point of departure, the full circle and a return to the point of new departure.

The degeneration of traditional African art is not only due to the European superior military force and power but also to the inherent weakness in African cultures. The evolution of the culture took place in isolation and ideas were therefore accepted so absolutely and unquestionably that the presence of new ideas presents a serious challenge.

The impact of European civilization on the various cultures of the world has been different. ²⁷ Some like the Aztecs died fighting. Others like the Bushman avoided the confrontation and moved deeper into the desert and preferred to die a natural death.

Others have adapted, come to terms with the new way and have digested the onslaught, and a new reality is being formed fusing the old traditional ideas and a synthesis of the new. This, in many respects has created the intellectual African artist and interlectualism is the death of art. Shona sculpture has responded to social and political change but has refused to be pulled into a stereotyped Europeanization. The vision is vital and free.

The Islamic faith does not allow figurative representation and Islamic art shown its manifestation in geometric, 'ornament' and calligraphy. Calligraphy grew from the profound respect for the sacred word. Ibrahim El Salahi, an artist from Khartoum found

through his love of the Koran, and the practising of Arabic calligraphy, that the text has embodied in it, forms and images as vital as the idea behind it. The oral tradition of the Islamic faith manifested itself in calligraphy which he, Salahi sees and feels and which provides the personal world of myth and imagery. He has taken the essential part of his life, belief and tradition and has created the reality which is not new in the sense of being something different but the reality which he knows to be true and meaningful. The reality lives.

The knowledge of life is within all peoples. African myth is no different to Eskimo or Celtic. The understanding of the runes of the Celts and the Churinga of the Australian Aborigines are read and understood by these people and hold the same meaning.

The implication that African art is understood by Africans only because the Western mind cannot interpret the symbolism, takes African art to the level of 'sign' language.

Shona sculpture which has hardly any artistic tradition has grown from the same understanding of life, from an oral tradition like that of the Celts or of Islam. The tradition holds the symbol. The Shona artist has something to say and is more concerned with statement than the formalistic experiment. The artist sticks to mediums which he finds a satisfying vehicle for his ideas. The Shona has chosen stone rather than wood. Black and green serpentine and to a lesser degree, granite and soapstone, is the vehicle for his expression. The 'grain' of the stone is utilized and allowed to enforce its suggestion. More recent works show a change in developing. The immediate interpretation of the myth and religion has gathered momentum

and a looser, freer abstraction of his ideas is shown. Birds are shown in a tree in a way that shows his understanding of trees and birds. It is a magical bird in a magical tree. Organic growth forms have begun to appear. Often the stone shape is allowed to remain and is incised with leaves and stems.

Birds have always been part of the Shona subject matter. From the Shona's religious belief, the Chapungu bird and the hybrid Chapungu man to the later birds which show an understanding of birds reminiscent of Brancusi, and to birds like some animal hamster bird with speckled backs and pouting chests.

The baboon man with incised beard and ZUZU water spirits mix with the protector birds and the father with his three sons, all subjects of the Shona's understanding. Where much European or Western art is involving itself in gimmickry, the African artist and the Shona sculptor are the first generation of artists whose imagery contains the freshness of vision that is not naïve but which comes from the memories of his people and the vocabulary of his own dreams. The mask, the sacrifice, spirits and folklore form the elements from which the new mythologies are being built.

Shona sculpture has developed into an internationally recognised element and various works are included in European galleries and collections. It must be guarded from becoming a commercial opportunity which would destroy the energy and power in this potent work, which has shown itself to be the rejuvenation or reembodyment of an African art formed from a society which has no artistic tradition other than a traditionally artistic mind.

The truth and myth in African art, or any art, for that matter, is not the folklore or the religious ideas of individual peoples, or the spirit world, or the collective unconscious alone, but is the totality of the collective artistic mind which seeks the truth,

The artist like Narcissus, gets his nose ²⁸
nearer and nearer to the surface of life.

and he does this through a continual effort to find it by following the pathways provided by the totality.

The traditional African artist is closer to the pathway only because he has not strayed as far from it as his Western counterpart. The collective artistic mind is universal. It just has to be looked for and found. The magic word provides a pathway and the word is part of the myth. The traditional African artist who works within his culture and its framework, uses the language of truth more easily and unconsciously because it is not questioned or made to stand any analytical tests, but is accepted in its entirety. The framework of his tradition is surmounted without seemingly being so. It is surmounted and reaches a new level of reality each time because each new work is better than the last. He strives for the perfection of the idea without ever imagining that this perfection will arrive, for if it did, he would cease looking for the truth of his existence.

For this reason, traditional African art has a real place within the understanding of what art is. It embraces poetry, music and dance within the format of the artistic mind. The 'primitive' man is no less intelligent than man today. His imagery and sensibility no less developed. The replacement of the collective

artistic thought (the totality of myth) by analytical and educated interlect, and scientific fact, leaves a void which is filled with 'isms', prisms and plastic hamburgers.

Traditional African art is largely dead and exists only in the weakest form.

Contemporary African art, in most cases, has succumbed to the polythene civilization and acrylic colour which results in a hysterical, mind jarring screech. The attempted synthesis of African 'form' with Western sensibilities is a disaster. The few, however, who have realized the totalized artistic mind as being universal, have managed the synthesis which has room to breath, and lives its own life, and which derives its strength and force from an enquiring mind and the body of myth.

FOOTNOTES

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|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Malinowski, Bronislaw | Sex, Culture and Myth |
| 2. Malinowski, Bronislaw | Sex, Culture and Myth |
| 3. Frued, Philip | Myths of Creation |
| 4. Christoffels, Dr H. | African Art and Spirituality |
| 5. Muensterberger, W. | Sculpture of Primitive Man |
| 6. Cristoffels, Dr H. | African Art & Spirituality |
| 7. Leiris, Micher & Delange,
Jacqueline | African Art |
| 8. Bradshaw, Prof. B. | Art & Totality |
| 9. Leach, Edmund | Levi Stauss |
| 10. Frued, Philip | Myths of Creation |
| 11. Jahn, Janheinz | Muntu |
| 12. Jahn, Janheinz | Muntu |
| 13. Oggdommelli | Muntu |
| 14. Jahn, Janheinz | Muntu |
| 15. Jung, Dr Carl Gustav | Man and his Symbols |
| 16. Sannes, G.W. | African Primitive |
| 17. Jung, Dr Carl Gustav | Man and his Symbols |
| 18. Jung, Dr Carl Gustav | Man and his Symbols |
| 19. Bradshaw, Prof. B. | Art and Totality |
| 20. Klee, Paul | On Modern Art |
| 21. Lewis, Wyndham | Wyndham Lewis on Art |
| 22. Lewis, Wyndham | Wyndham Lewis on Art |
| 23. Jung, Dr Carl Gustav | Man and his Symbols |
| 24. Lewis, Wyndham | Wyndham Lewis on Art |
| 25. Jung, Dr Carl Gustav | Man and his Symbols |
| 26. Malinowski, Bronislaw | Sex, Culture and Myth |
| 27. Beir, Ulli | Contemporary Art in Africa |
| 28. Lewis, Wyndham | Wyndham Lewis on Art |

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