

# *The Dictionary of Art*

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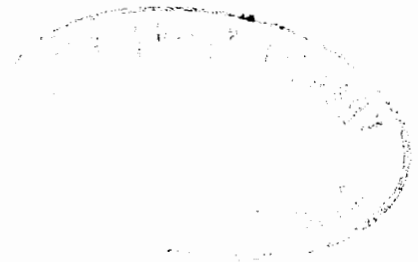
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S. J. VERNOTT

(iv) *Modern developments.* The period of high European colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries and the consequent opening up of the African interior to world trade and governmental systems encouraged Christian missionary endeavour throughout Africa. Moreover this has continued into post-colonial times. Islam also spread more widely in the same period and for similar reasons. In the late 20th century indigenous and 'intrusive' faiths exist side by side within the same society, within the same community, within the same family, and even within the same individual.

Virtually everywhere the spread of Christianity has been accompanied by the rise of prophets. These have tended to appear in opposition to the racially inequitable practices of most early mission churches. Some of these prophets have established their own breakaway or 'separatist' churches, free of European control, although many of these have been shortlived, rent by dissension and competition. Other churches have grown into large organizations in their own right. The Zairean Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu is one example, as are the many churches of the Zambian Watch-Tower movement, which grew out of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement. In western Africa many churches with Christian antecedents have developed into faith-healing, often Pentecostalist-type churches with recreated 'traditional African' elements. The Aladura churches of Nigeria are an example. Other prophetic movements that began in opposition to mission churches have turned their backs on Western Christianity altogether and have adopted supposed original African symbols. They have also emphasized polygyny as an 'African' institution, descent from the Christian kings of Ethiopia, taboos on European-type foods, clothing and hairstyles and so on.

Modern reformist movements in Islamic societies in Africa have been similar, although they have not arisen in response to racial issues. The best known are the great Fulani *jihad* of the early 19th century, which was directed against what the Fulani leaders considered the lax practices of the more established Islam of the region, and the Mahdist movement in late 19th-century Sudan, which was directed against the presence of European and Egyptian power. The effects of such movements and developments on the visual art and architecture of Africa have yet to be fully explored.

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JOHN MIDDLETON

## II. Art and aesthetics.

The art-historical and aesthetic categories applied to Afri-

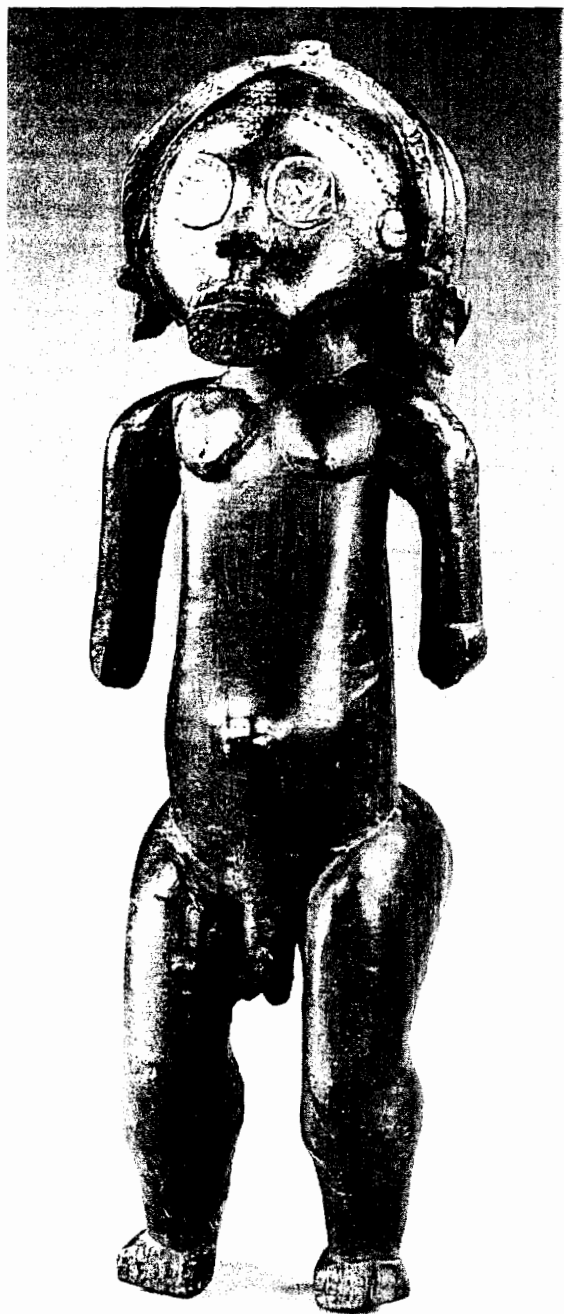
can art are in a constant state of flux. The history of their usage has been dogged by misapprehensions and misrepresentations, although this is hardly surprising, given that they often represent the inappropriate application of Western intellectual and aesthetic concepts. This article provides an overview of the history of scholarly research into and discussion of African art and in particular figure sculpture (see §1 below), followed by an account of the vast increase in studies of indigenous systems of aesthetic evaluation since the 1960s (see §2 below).

1. Critical and scholarly approaches. 2. Aesthetic evaluation.

1. CRITICAL AND SCHOLARLY APPROACHES. The perception and identity of African art in universal art history are profoundly marked by two categories of art objects: wooden masks and figurative sculpture. In 1926 Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro in *Primitive Negro Sculpture* went so far as to present a map of 'The Country of Negro Art' that drew a closed line around the regions of West and Central Africa and effectively limited African art to the mask and figurative art traditions that characterize these regions. Truly, however, the importance of figurative art to an understanding of African art history cannot be overestimated. Frank Willett (p. 27) stated that 'the greatest contribution Africa has made ... to the cultural heritage of mankind is its richly varied sculpture'. More recently, Susan Vogel (see 1986 exh. cat. *African Aesthetics*, p. xiv), in asserting the moral basis of much African art, in which 'beautiful' is intended and perceived also to be 'good', has argued that this conflation of beauty and goodness may explain why, in African art 'as in Greek art, the principal subject is the human figure—to the almost total exclusion of nature in the form of landscape, or plant motifs'. Consequently, while this discussion attempts a historical overview of scholarly understandings of African art as a whole, it is inevitably focused primarily on understandings of figure sculpture.

(i) Historical attitudes. (ii) Style and canon. (iii) Context and meaning. (iv) Appreciation of form.

(i) *Historical attitudes.* The predominance of figuration in African art traditions and in the history of Western collecting has left a legacy of countless thousands of African figures dispersed throughout the world in ethnographic and art museums as well as in private collections. These figures have been little understood in terms of the original intentionality and socio-historical context that brought them into being. The 'discovery' of primitive art including African sculpture, in the early 20th century was a 'discovery' of its perceived formal qualities accompanied by an almost total, and indeed often wilful, ignorance of its cultural content. Figures acquired in Africa 'as curios rather than art, and as evidence of what [Europeans] considered to be the primitive barbarity of Africans' (see MacGaffey, p. 32) were taken back to Europe as 'found objects'; little or no documentation was acquired with them, and they survived as 'mute objects, themselves damaged in the processes of collection and storage' (MacGaffey, p. 33). The meanings subsequently attributed to these silent objects were invented ideas that reveal more about Western history than about African art history.



10. Fang reliquary guardian figure, wood and metal, h. 700 mm (Paris, Musée Dapper)

of an art object'. The method of style analysis is based upon 'the separation of a design into its constituent parts so as to examine these elements and to determine their significance in the expressive and aesthetic character of the work as a whole' or in terms of common denominators within specific artistic traditions. In an attempt to systematize the study of style in Fang figurative sculpture, Louis Perrois examined a corpus of figures and measured

proportions, such as the height of the head in relation to that of the torso, and described the positions of arms and legs, the style of coiffure and a number of specific details, such as the shape of eyes, nose, mouth, ears, navel and breasts. From his investigation he deduced that Fang style could be divided into the northern 'hyper- and longiform' styles and the southern 'equiform and breviform' styles. At one level Perrois' work can be seen as a somewhat obsessive attempt to codify the denominators of sub-styles, as if thereby to prove that artists necessarily work within culturally predetermined styles, albeit perhaps unconsciously.

Style analysis as objective description has resulted in the establishment of the canon of 'African art': the differentiation of styles in terms of their genres and their ethnic provenance. Some scholars, such as William Fagg, have made major contributions to the field of African art studies by advancing studies of 'tribal styles' (see Willett, p. 29). As Sidney Kasfir has argued, the approach has often been limited to an implicit 'one tribe, one style' paradigm, in which the framework of analysis is implicitly or explicitly the tribal unit with its attendant stylistic denominators. Tribal styles have also been seen, in turn, as building blocks to larger entities, the larger 'style regions' of African art (see 1968 exh. cat.; Roy), a version of which approach has been adopted in this survey (see §VII below). Jan Vansina has argued, however, that a distributional approach to African art is insufficient and that 'the historical evolution of the [African] art forms, even the sculptural forms, has not been a subject of sustained research' (p. 1). He argues for a study of 'art in Africa and its history' rather than an 'art history of Africa', the latter not being possible owing to the lack of monographs as well as the fact that 'too many scholars in the field of "African art" have been allergic to historical pursuits'. It is unclear what place 'style regions' will occupy in the future development of an African art history. They have been a convenient way to explore and group larger stylistic tendencies of African sculpture, especially figurative, but as the study of African art develops to include the areas of Africa north of the Sahara and the relatively neglected art traditions of East and Southern Africa, the inadequacy and profound limitations of the 'style region' approach become more and more evident. The regional geographic paradigm allows for an examination of artistic traits and comparative cultural phenomena, but it has yielded little in terms of history, concentrating as it has on space rather than time.

(iii) *Context and meaning.* The classificatory approach to types of African figurative sculpture has resulted in incomplete understandings of questions of meaning in African sculpture as well as of the relationship between the form of an image and its original efficacy. Leon Siroto (p. 6) has argued that in field research 'the type-oriented question "What does this image (or object) represent?" can lead to crucial misunderstandings' and that 'equally crucial misunderstandings of imagery have resulted from failure to ask the person-oriented question "Whom does this image (or object) represent?"' (p. 7). A hypothetical exchange between an investigator and a field informant may be illustrative. In a Baule village in Côte d'Ivoire, a

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11. Baule figure sculpture of an 'other-world man' (*Ufolo bian*), wood and pigments, c.1950s (Washington, DC, National Museum of African Art)

worker seeing a sculpted figure and asking, 'What is this?', may receive the reply, 'It is a wooden figure' (*naka sran*), or 'It is a figure of an "other-world man"' (*Ufolo bian*; see fig. 11). If, however, a further question were to be asked, 'Whom does this figure represent?', the answer would be the name of a specific individual, such as Gbatin Kwamu, 'Kwamu the dandy'.

Approaches to African art that concentrate too much on the shared parameters and components of style in objects removed from their context have often overlooked the significance of the subtle differences in form that created the individuality and power of a specific work. Leon Siroto remarked (p. 7) that '[African] images often show great care in their sculptural rendering and seem individual enough to carry specific information about their personal identity'. He argued for a connection between a belief in animism—'belief in personalized, man-like supernaturals' (p. 8)—and the artistic interpretation of form, such that 'the carver's recognition of the spirit as a distinct individual compelled him to use its form as a way of differentiating it from all other spirits, and, in some cases, from humans as well' (p. 20). Wyatt MacGaffey argued convincingly for the 'personhood' of such ritual objects as Kongo power figures (*ninkisi*; sing. *nkisi*; see fig. 12), claiming that they incarnate specific, named persons who are invoked, addressed and negotiated with in speech. Part of the identity of such figures is in their form and the accumulated materials or medicines added to it in use.

Arnold Rubin argued that 'the content of African sculpture has clearly not received the attention it deserves' (see 1974 exh. cat., *African Accumulative Sculpture*, p. 36).



12. Kongo figure sculpture, *nkisi nkondi*, mainly wood, glass and iron, h. 423 mm, from Congo or Zaïre (Washington, DC, National Museum of African Art)