

WHY EUROPE ACKNOWLEDGED TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WOOD SCULPTURES AFTER FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF THEIR CONDEMNATION

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ABSTRACT

Europe, having condemned traditional African wood carvings for five centuries, turned back and acknowledged the same objects as ingenious works of art. The carvings were acknowledged because the conditions which influenced their condemnation had largely changed: slavery had been abolished and Africans and their carvings had gained respect; traditions, conservatism, complacency and ethnocentrism had relaxed; Europe had understood the symbolic nature of the carvings and had recognized their aesthetic qualities.

Encouraged by anthropological writings, aesthetic, art and scholastic revolutions, and as a testimony of her acknowledgement, Europe acquired myriads of the sculptures for study, pleasure and exhibition; and demonstrating their acknowledgement, many European artists adopted the style of the carvings and copied samples of the figures into their art works.

KEYWORDS: Carvings, acknowledgement, condemnation aesthetics, revolution, artists.

INTRODUCTION

Although Europe had ruthlessly condemned traditional African[1] wood carvings for half a millennium, and had scornfully regarded them as "barbarous fetishes", "products of lunatics and unintelligent thought", works befitting the "rubbish-bin", she, in the first decade of the twentieth century, acclaimed and acknowledged the same sculptures as ingenious works of art. The carvings were thus promoted from a mere curiosity into the realm of global art. This remarkable promotion prompted Willett to render the following homage to Africa: "The greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind is its richly varied sculpture" [2]. This homage, demonstrating Europe's acknowledgement of the carvings, seems to show that she was initially wrong in condemning the artifacts. But now the question is: what caused Europe to turn back to acknowledge the same carvings which she had so scornfully condemned. This important and interesting question, of course, is what this paper seeks to examine.

CHANGES IN THE CONDITIONS THAT LED TO THE CONDEMNATION

To enquire about why Europe turned back to recognize traditional African wood carvings, the simplest answer would be that the conditions that led to their condemnation were no longer the same during their recognition; the generation that acknowledged the carvings was different from those who condemned the artifacts for the past five hundred years; those who acknowledged the carvings, unlike their forefathers, realized the philosophical and symbolic nature of the sculptures; they also understood some aspects of the culture of the Africans who produced the carvings and consequently appreciated the artifacts.

Regarding the change of conditions, we point out that the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in 1888 influenced Europe to accept Africans as their equals in human status and to respect them and their carvings. These social revolutions and their consequent acceptance of the sculptures had their root cause in the liberality lectures that emphasized the equality of all human races-lectures delivered by such renowned personalities as Voltaire, Rousseau and Louis Blanc of France, Thomas Paine of England and Abraham Lincoln of America.

An important phenomenon which contributed to the acknowledgement of the carvings was that the generation which accepted the sculptures had, to some extent, revolted against the traditional, conservative, ethnocentric and complacent attitudes which had previously led to the condemnation. That generation, unlike their predecessors was ready to accept any forms of art irrespective of their place of origin. The cultured middle class, having been influenced by the Age of Reason of the eighteenth century, had not only cultivated the cult of the exotic which saw a great demand of art works from all parts of the world, but had also developed an insatiable appetite for all forms of new knowledge. It was this unbiased attitude which led to the study and understanding of many aspects of African art and cultures and which contributed to the acknowledgement of African carvings.

Another remarkable phenomenon which led to the acknowledgement of African carvings was the desire of some European painters to live among some citizens of the developing world to study and adopt the techniques and style of their arts. This prompted Eugene Delacroix to travel to North Africa; Catlin journeyed to the North American Indians, Hume Nisbett visited New Guinea, Paul Gauguin lived among the inhabitants of Martinique and Tahiti and Max Pechstein went to the Pelew Islands in Micronesia. Although



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of the art of Europe, and the desire for a new style of art. The revolutionaries showed an outburst of emotions and were ruthless to European art. All the revolutionaries, like Gauguin, had "a feeling of surfeit and weariness with the fictive representation of nature, perfected at the end of the nineteenth century, which offered no prospects of individual advancement to painters who were striving after a completely new technical and visual achievement"[19].

The revolutionaries desired to express personal experience, search for individual truth and create conceptual or imaginary images having no existence in nature. They discovered to their surprise that these artistic qualities had existed in African carvings for centuries, if not millennia. This is why the revolutionary painters turned to African art for stylistic inspiration which led to the acknowledgement of the carvings. One of the early revolutionaries whose artistic views coincided with those of Africans was William Blake (1787-1827), who "despised the official art of the academies, and declined to accept its standards"[20]. In fact, "Blake was so wrapped up in his vision that he refused to draw from life and relied entirely on his inner eye. Like the medieval artists, he did not care for accurate representation, because the significance of each figure of his dreams was of such overwhelming importance to him that questions of mere correctness seemed to him irrelevant"[21].

William Hogarth (1697-1764), like Blake, having become dissatisfied with the trend of European art, deliberately began to create a new kind of painting for a new public. Doubtlessly, both Blake and Hogarth would have been happy if they had lived to realize that their revolutionary efforts were leading Europe to acknowledge African carvings.

A prominent phenomenon which eventually led to the recognition of African carvings was the French Revolution of 1789. The revolution marked a series of successive overthrows of the conventions of European art. Eugene Delacroix (1799-1863), for example, "had no patience with all the talk about the Greeks and Romans, with the insistence on correct drawings and constant imitation of classical statues"[22]. He believed that in picture making, knowledge in colour schemes was more important than draughtsmanship, and imagination more than knowledge in painting. It was on account of this dissatisfaction that he travelled to North Africa to study, a point to which reference has already been made.

The Industrial Revolution also contributed to the dissatisfaction which gradually led to the recognition of African art. During the Industrial Revolution, the mass production of cheap and tawdry ornamental imitations affected the quality of draughtsmanship and therefore annoyed artists. Following the cumulative effect of the dissatisfaction, the artists began to look for a new subject-matter and new styles of art. Architects, for instance, began to question: "why must it be just Palladio's style?"[23]. They had grown weary of following Palladio's style of designing houses.

Therefore they cried for a change. This rebellious attitude occurred at a time which Gombrich calls "The Break in Tradition" (between the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). In those days, the rebellious artists followed the dictates of their own conscience, each painter doing what pleased him. The situation continued until the 1870s when an art movement, called Impressionism, came into existence. In Impressionism, "All the old bogeys of 'dignified subject-matter' and of 'balanced compositions', of 'correct drawing' were laid to rest. The artist was responsible to no one but his own sensibilities for what he painted and how he painted it"[24]. Impressionism dissatisfied a lot of painters, and following the trend of ever-growing dissatisfaction, there was an outcry for a new order or art, which resulted in a new movement called "New Art" (Art Nouveau), which also failed to satisfy the revolutionary and other artists. Among those who became dissatisfied with Impressionism were Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin whose efforts to solve the problems, created by Impressionism, led to the early forms of "Modern Art" of Europe, which contributed immensely to the acknowledgement of African carvings. Cezanne's effort resulted in Cubism which originated in France. Van Gogh's attempt engendered Expressionism which gained root in Germany and Gauguin's solution resulted in the various forms of Primitivism which was most widespread. Included among these movements which gained inspiration from African carvings, was Fauvism. Perhaps the acknowledgement of African carving would have delayed without the efforts of these movements.

Another factor which induced the revolutionaries to acknowledge traditional African wood carvings was photography. Since the camera could reproduce optical images far more quickly, accurately and cheaply than what the most skilful hand was capable of doing the revolutionaries were unable to compete with this scientific invention. They were therefore compelled to abandon representational art and search for a new way of producing art works. During their exploratory efforts, they "rediscovered" African carvings which so much satisfied their curiosity that they immediately acknowledged and imitated them.

THE ROLE OF ART COLLECTORS IN THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF AFRICAN CARVINGS

European collectors of African carvings played a great role in influencing other European citizens to acknowledge the sculptures. Although the carvings were initially collected as objects of curiosity, during the aesthetic revolution, the artifacts became available for study. The early collections induced more private and public collectors, such as museums, to collect more of the artifacts for study and pleasure, a phenomenon which influenced the recognition. Had the collector not made the carvings available to painters, aestheticians and connoisseurs, the acknowledgement of the artifacts might not have been possible.

THE ROLE OF NON-ART SCHOLARS IN ACKNOWLEDGING AFRICAN CARVINGS

Perhaps the recognition of African carvings might not have been imminent or possible without the research efforts by non-art scholars whose research activities spurred the artists to embark on intensive studies of non-European arts, including the wood carvings of Africa.

Among the scholars whose researches did motivate the artists was the German writer, Leo Frobenius, whose writings led many Africans to hail him "as the first European to render the proper homage due to African civilizations"[25]. Also, European artists, aestheticians and connoisseurs were influenced to study African carvings through the "Numerous publications and exhibitions, both official and private, as well as documentary films... [which] made the life of African people familiar to the educated Western world"[26].

The period of intensive studies of African carvings during the first decade of this century coincided with the remarkable scientific research findings by Sigmund Freud who introduced a new concept evaluating human behaviour, Albert Einstein whose theory of relativity in 1905 revolutionized people's viewpoint of the universe, and Max Plank's Quantum Theory which modified Newtonian principles of radiation. Since that era was the period of scholastic revolution in which nearly all scholars were conducting researchers into existing disciplines in Europe, and since new theories were replacing the old, artists might feel odd if they were left out, hence their intensive study of African and other non-European arts, studies, which, as we have known, led to the acknowledgement of African wood carvings.

CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE CARVINGS AS INGENIOUS WORKS OF ART

As a concrete evidence of the acknowledgement of the sculptures, a great number of European artists copied and adopted the styles of some of the carvings. A prominent example of such artists was Ernst Barlach, a German sculptor, who "... actually copied a number of real [African] Negro sculptures, not only for the purpose of technical study, but also for pleasure"[27]. Barlach's greatness lay in his wooden figures which showed some characteristic features of African art - figures which like African sculptures, showed astonishing simplicity and force. His models were normally thick-set, and like African sculptures, they were conspicuously plump. However, in spite of such profound African influence, Barlach was more greatly impressed by Gothic art. Apart from Barlach, Amedeo Modigliani modelled his forms on traditional African carvings and adopting "as his own something of the Negroes' aesthetic approach"[28]. Perhaps the best example of the artists who was profoundly influenced by African and other non-European forms of art was Pablo Ruiz Y. Picasso. The influence of African sculpture first appeared in Picasso's painting:

"*Demoiselles d'Avignon*" of 1907 (now in New York, M. of M.A.). In this painting, the face of the fourth figure has great stylistic affinity with a mask from the Dan-Guere ethnic group of La Cote d'Ivoire. It is a semi-abstract composition, showing a characteristic feature of African wood carvings. In fact, if African sculptures are placed near Picasso's Cubistic paintings, a remarkable stylistic affinity with the two forms of art is quite obvious. However, Picasso did not adopt African style slavishly. The characteristics style of his original European art was still traceable in his works.

Generally, in 1907, African sculptural forms were largely merged into the dynamic art forms of the then creative evolution of Europe, and "The use of open space enclosed within sculptures by African artists appears as one of the more obvious features, borrowed by twentieth century Western sculptors"[29]. The French Cubists took interest in the form of African and other non-European sculptures. The German Expressionists were attracted toward the emotional content of the artifacts. The polychromatic technique of African masks also influenced European artists. These visible effects of African art on European paintings and sculptures are concrete evidences that Europe has recognized traditional African wood carvings as ingenious works of art.

Again, the rush for indiscriminate collection of the carvings, which occurred in the beginning of the present century is a concrete evidence of the acknowledgement of the sculptures. Both individuals and institutions, like museums, scrambled for African sculptures. Some museums exhibited the carvings side by side with the Modern Art of Europe. The Grenoble museum was the first to do this. Moreover, in 1879 the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero, the first museum devoted entirely to the arts and crafts of non-European people was found in Paris, and an "African Museum" was temporarily installed in the Théâtre du Châtelet at the time of the production titled "Black Venus".

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has given an account of the changes that occurred in Europe, and that resulted in the acknowledgement of traditional African carvings as ingenious works of art. It is remarkable to note, as hinted earlier, that now it is not only Europe that acknowledges the carvings but also the entire world recognizes the sculptures as superb works of art. The story of the carvings' "triumphal entry" into the realm of global art is indeed remarkable and fascinating. It is our fervent hope, therefore, that like the carvings, Africa will overcome her problems and take its rightful position in the affairs of the world.

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4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. [Anon]. "Aesthetics", *William Benton, Chicago, etc., 1972*, p. 222.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Willett, *op.cit.* p.143.
10. *Ibid.*, p.146.
11. The word "fetish" is debunked by modern anthropologists because it is ambiguous and derogatory to African religion.
12. Willett, *op.cit.* p.145.
13. They were a group of painters who exhibited their works in France in 1905. Because of the distortions in their works and the use of violent colours, a critic dubbed them collectively 'Les Fauves' (the wild beasts).
14. They were a group of painters who between 1906 and 1914 worked in France. They earned the name cubists because in their paintings they expressed their figures in geometric shapes. in the form of cubes and cones.
15. They were a group of painters who expressed their forms by means of exaggerations and distortions of line and colour.
16. They were painters whose works depicted the simple life of "primitive" peoples. The "primitives" used in this context refers to the painters of the twentieth century and not of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
17. Adam, L., *Primitive Art, Revised and Enlarged Edition*, Melbourne, 1949, p.228.
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21. *Ibid.* p.368.
22. *Ibid.* p.381.
23. *Ibid.* p.358.
24. *Ibid.* p.395.
25. Leiris and Delange, *op.cit.*, p.5.
26. *Ibid.*, p.33.
27. Adam, *op.cit.* p.227.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Willett, *op.cit.*, p.148.

GHANA COLLECTION