

WHY EUROPE WAITED FOR FIVE CENTURIES BEFORE ACKNOWLEDGING THE WOOD CARVINGS OF BLACK AFRICA AS WORKS OF ART

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ABSTRACT

Although such an important person as Charles the Bold had by 1470, purchased some Black African wood carvings and though some of the sculptures were later displayed in some famous European museums and parlours, the continent waited till the beginning of the twentieth century before acknowledging the carvings as works of art. The reasons for the five hundred years of delay include Europe's condemnation of the carvings as barbarous fetishes devoid of aesthetic qualities, her conservative, ethnocentric and complacent attitude, her ignorance of the carvings' symbolic nature, her little or no predilection for exotic artifacts and her disrespect for Africans and their handiworks. Above all, Europe initially failed to acknowledge the carvings because they were socio-economically unimportant to her.

Keywords: Fetishes, carvings, aesthetic, acknowledge, rejection, disdain.

INTRODUCTION

It is the primary objective of this paper to investigate why Europe waited for five hundred years before she acknowledged the woodcarvings of Black Africa^[1] as works of art, that is, as ingenious artifacts worthy of admiration. This is worth investigating because it might be puzzling to hear of such a long delay in acknowledging the carvings which, according to history, first arrived in Europe as early as the fifteenth century A.D. but were acknowledged as late as the first decade of the twentieth century.

The delay could be more bewildering when one considers the fact that such an important person as Charles the Bold^[2] bought some of the carvings in the fifteenth century. For as we learn, "There exists a bill of sale that shows that in 1470 Charles the Bold bought from a Portuguese several wooden sculptures, no doubt from the West Coast of Africa"^[3] Beside those bought by Charles the Bold, many Black African carvings were later kept as curios in some people's parlours and in such famous Museums as the Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero of Paris, the African Museum which was temporarily established in the Theatre du Chatelet, the Ulm Museum, the British Museum and the Manchester Museum, yet the acknowledgement of the carvings took half a millennium.

CONDEMNATION ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS

Perhaps the main reason, which caused the delay, was the condemnation and rejection of the carvings. We learn in this regard that in the fifteenth century A.D., when some Portuguese Christian Missionaries saw a number of the carvings for the first time in Africa, they condemned the

sculptures as "barbarous fetishes",^[4] objects associated with devilish practices and demonic agencies. To propagate this idea with the intention to disdain African religions and establish Christianity in Africa, "a number of works [Black African Carvings] were gathered and sent to Europe, often as examples of heathenish^[5] practices, to encourage support for missionary societies^[6]". This would seem to explain why the missionaries applied the derogatory term *Feitico* (fetish) to the African religious carvings employed in the worship of West African deities.

The Portuguese word *feitico*, derived from the Latin term *facere* (meaning to make), from which comes *factitius* (something made by hand), is alleged to connote "gods made by hand" or "false gods"^[7]. In fact, since the carvings are not gods but considered to be temporary abodes of African deities, and since gods are spirits and not made by human hands, the application of the term *feitico* to the carvings was perhaps a calculated attempt to influence Africa, Europe and probably the whole world to reject the sculptures as it really occurred in Europe and among most African scholars trained in Christian educational institutions.

Apart from calling the carvings fetishes, Europe condemned them as horrible objects, products of savages or primitives, and of unintelligent thought.

In some cases, the carvings were regarded as worthless objects that should be thrown away. For instance, a critic is quoted as saying the following about two wooden masks from La Cote d'Ivoire (The Ivory Coast): "My wife wants to throw these horrors into the rubbish-bin"^[8]. This unpleasant comment should of course generate such questions: Why were the masks referred to as "these horrors"? And why did the wife decide to throw them into the rubbish bin? Was it because the masks were regarded as abominable fetishes or because they were aesthetically worthless? It is of course difficult to answer these questions. However, we know that apart from calling the carvings abominable fetishes, Europe regarded them as aesthetically unworthy.

AESTHETIC WORTHLESSNESS

From the standpoint of aesthetics, Europe considered the carvings as worthless because the aesthetic principles of the sculptures were incompatible with European aesthetic values. It was classical Graeco-Roman aesthetic principles, which Europe had assimilated and had been using as her standard of aesthetic judgement. Since such aesthetic principles had become the aesthetic vision and experience of Europe, she examined artifacts with the lens of that vision. Therefore, any artifact, which failed to conform to that vision, could be condemned and rejected as happened to the woodcarvings of Black Africa. From aesthetic viewpoint, the carvings suffered rejection because instead of radiating classical Graeco-Roman aesthetic rays, they radiated African aesthetic beams. Therefore, instead of seeing naturalistic and



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photographic representations in the carvings, as Europe was accustomed to seeing in classical Graeco-Roman sculptures, she noticed carvings, which were abstracted, non-photographic and non-representational. Moreover, instead of seeing refined sculptures depicting meticulous details, Europe perceived crude or unrefined carvings lacking minute details; and instead of seeing "relaxed" and "flexible" sculptures having a romantic and sensuous appeal; Europe saw "stiff" and "static" carvings which lacked sensuous and romantic appeal and which were therefore obnoxious to her.

Considering the condemnation on aesthetic grounds, it may be argued that Europe was sincere and was not motivated by social prejudice since for similar aesthetic reasons, she appeared to have more ruthlessly condemned her own impressionist^[9] painters and their works. The ruthlessness of Europe's condemnation of impressionist painters and works is evident in the following quotation:

The Rue le Peleties is a road of disasters. After the fire at the Opera, there is now yet another disaster there. An exhibition has just been opened at Durand-Ruel, which allegedly contains paintings. I enter and my horrified eyes behold something terrible. Five or six lunatics, among them a woman have joined together and exhibited their works. I have seen people rock with laughter in front of these pictures, but my heart bled when I saw them. These would-be artists call themselves revolutionaries. "Impressionists". They take a piece of canvas, colour and brush, daub a few patches of colour on them at random and sign the whole thing with their name. It is a delusion of the same kind as if the inmates of Bedlam picked up stones from the wayside and imagined they had found diamonds. [10]

As evident from the quotation, the critic refuses to acknowledge the painters as real artists, and fails also to accept their paintings as real works of art. It should therefore not surprise any one if the Black African carvings were initially not acknowledged as works of ingenuity. Moreover, if the "respected critic", writing in 1876 about the second exhibition of Impressionism [11] called his own compatriot painters lunatics, why should Africans take deeply to heart if they were called primitives or savages?

EUROPE'S CONSERVATIVE ATTITUDE

Europe's delay in acknowledging the woodcarvings stemmed also from her conservative attitude since she normally appreciated, preferred and acknowledged traditional artifacts that conformed to European conventions. As we learn about Europe of the previous centuries, "the only esteemed works of art were from the hands of men who belonged to the so-called civilised world... and who on the whole, were healthy-minded and trained in tradition [12]. Of course, the civilised world mentioned here was mainly Europe and the tradition to which reference was made was European tradition. Since Black Africa was not included among the civilised world, and since Black African sculptors were not trained in European tradition, no one should perhaps express surprise about the rejection of Black African carvings. Concerning the rejection of Impressionist paintings also, though the painters were Europeans, their paintings did not conform to the principles of European traditional art. About

Europe's predilection for her traditional artifacts too, we learn that "Those who buy pictures usually have a certain idea in mind. They want to get something very similar to what they have seen elsewhere."

LITTLE OR NO PASSION FOR EXOTIC ART WORKS

The rejection of Black African carvings was also based on the fact that before the "Aesthetic Revolution" in Europe in the 1890s, Europe had little or no passion for exotic artifacts. This situation, as we have noted, did prevail because normally non-European artifacts were aesthetically unacceptable to Europe. They could, moreover, not be accepted because, as stated already, they were not made by the so-called civilised Europeans, and were also not made in accordance with European tradition. We could therefore realise that social prejudice played a great role in the rejection of non-European artifacts including Black African carvings.

IGNORANCE OF THE SYMBOLIC NATURE OF THE CARVINGS

The condemnation and rejection were partly due to Europe's ignorance of the symbolic and philosophical nature of the carvings. Europe was not aware that the abstracted figures, with exaggerated portions, had symbolic and philosophical lessons to give. In her, ignorance, Europe wrongly condemned Black African carvers, thinking that the sculptors were not conscious of correct proportions. Therefore, while allowing herself to be guided by this wrong idea, she became intolerant with the proportional imbalance noticed in the sculptures. She was incensed by the excessive emphasis or inadequate shaping of the various parts of the figures. Specifically, Europe was disgusted with the excessively large heads and the extraordinarily short legs as against the relatively long torsos characterising the figures. Moreover, Europe found insulting the bulging foreheads and the introspective character of many of the carvings. The protruding stomachs of some of the sculptures with undue emphases on their navels, breasts and genitals were especially a nuisance to Europe. However, this kind of treatment was a symbolic and philosophical means by which African sculptors expressed the concept of wisdom, fertility, strength, the life beyond and so forth. The skill by which African sculptors expressed symbolic and philosophical messages seemed to have been too advanced for Europe to discern. But instead of enquiring about why the carvings were thus crafted, Europe hastily arrived at a wrong conclusion and consequently rejected the carvings.

COMPLACENCY AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Complacency and ethnocentrism also seemed to loom high among the factors that influenced Europe to reject the woodcarvings of Black Africa. It is perhaps on account of Europe's complacent and ethnocentric nature that in her dealings with developing nations, the latter are too often regarded as savages or primitives who belong to the less educated strata of our [European] society and whose art are mostly termed 'popular' or 'naïve' in contrast to the art of the elite[14]. Since Europe regarded the art of Africa and other developing areas as "naïve" or "popular", she appeared to think that good artistry could not emerge in Black Africa. This would seem to explain why Segy thinks that the beautiful

bronze heads of Ife were not made by Black Africans.

According to him:-

The astonishing Ife bronze heads may also indicate a Mediterranean influence. These heads have a classical Graeco-Roman cast. The Yoruba, original inhabitants of this territory, never created any such works. The purity of style could have been achieved only by artists already at the height of their development, artists for whom the style was an established tradition. We know that Greek sculptors wandered as far as Afghanistan to create the Gandhara style. Is it then not possible that some accompanied caravans to Ife? [15].

In fact, Segy's reasoning would seem to be ridiculous. For, why should he, without substantiation, think that the bronze heads were possibly made by some Greek sculptors who might have followed some caravans to Ife? Again, why should he say without proof that the Yoruba "never created such works"? Does Segy want to show that Black Africans could not have produced any beautiful art work in those days? If some Greek sculptors created the Gandhara style, does it logically follow that Greek sculptors also made the Ife bronze heads even though a semblance in style exists between the sculptures of Ife and Greece? Can the semblance not be coincidental? In fact, if Segy, a European, attempts to refute what has been established as the art works of Ife, why can other Europeans like him not deliberately refuse to accept the Black African carvings as works of ingenuity?

THE INFLUENCE OF SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The rejection was likely to have been influenced also by slavery and the slave trade. As well known, these inhuman and antisocial acts by Europeans dehumanised Black Africans and reduced them to the status of saleable commodities. The latter were thus deprived of respect and honour. Since slaves and their properties are usually not respected or recognised, it might be sound to argue that both slavery and the slave trade contributed to the rejection of the carvings.

LACK OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Doubtlessly, the carvings were rejected and could not be acknowledged as ingenious works because they were not politically, economically and socially beneficial to Europe. This may be evident in the following statement by Willett: "Very few pieces [Black African Carvings] seem to have been collected during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the slave trade was at its height". [16]

Why were few collected when the slave trade was at its peak? Was it not because the slaves were more socio-economically important to Europe than the carvings? Apart from socio-economic importance, can it be affirmed that the sculptures were of any importance to Europe? The fact that little attention was paid to their collection, and the fact that they were rejected, would seem to suggest that the carvings were in no way important to Europe.

CONCLUSION

As evident from the text, the paper has, in accordance with its objectives, discussed why Europe waited for five hundred years before acknowledging Black African

woodcarvings as ingenious artifacts worthy of admiration. The paper has hopefully shown that Europe initially condemned the carvings because her Christian faith was incompatible with African religious faith that employed the sculptures for worship. It has also shown that the condemnation, rejection and delay in acknowledging the carvings were partly due to Europe's displeasure of the aesthetic "unworthiness" of the carvings, her ignorance of the carvings' symbolic and philosophical nature, her complacency and ethnocentrism that influenced her to consider Black Africans and other developing peoples as primitive, and which made her term their art as "naïve" or "popular" and have no predilection for their artifacts. The disregard for Black African carvings also stemmed from Europe's conservative nature, the sale and enslavement of Black Africans who were thus dehumanised, and who, through such inhuman treatments, lost respect in person and properties.

Finally, as the paper has indicated, the rejection of the carvings and their delay of acknowledgement resulted also from the fact that the artifacts seemed to have no political, economic and social values that benefited Europe. But after all the scorn, condemnation and rejection which the carvings suffered, no one may gainsay that they have gained triumphal entry into the realm of esteemed artifacts that enjoy global admiration and praises.

REFERENCES

1. The term refers to the area occupied by the black people of Africa.
2. He was born in 1433. He became the Duke of Burgundy from 1467 perhaps till his death in 1477. His father was Duke Philip the Good and his mother was Isabella of Portugal.
3. Leiris, M. and Delange, J., African Art: The Arts of Mankind, Edited by Andre Malraux and Andre Parrot, Translated by Michael Ross, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968, p. 2.
4. Ibid, p. 8
5. The word is the adjectival form of heathenism used derogatorily to describe religious practices of those whose religions are regarded as inferior to those of Judaism, Christianity, Muslim and other religions that are highly acknowledged. The word "heathenish" stems from "heathen" which was allegedly derived from "heath" whose original meaning is a dweller on a heath which, according to Kwabena Amponsa, was a place isolated from the town and was an abode of criminals and vagabonds. (See Topics on West African Traditional Religion: Religious Studies Vol.2, Mfantsiman Press Limited, Cape Coast, 1975, p.9). Heath dwellers who were called heathens were said to be unpolished, uncivilised and uncouth. The term "heathenism" is therefore said to be inappropriate to use in connection with African religions since the word has no basic connection with religion and since it is used to degrade African religions.
6. Willett, F., African Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 1971, pp 84-7.

7. Segy, L., African Sculpture Speaks, Third Edition, Hill and Wang, New York, 1969, p. 10.
 8. Leiris, M., and Delange, J., op cit, P.8
 9. An artist who practised an artistic style known as Impressionism (see note no. 11 below).
 10. Gombrich, E.H., The Story of Art, The Phaidon Press, London, Dateless, p. 392.
 11. It was an artistic style, which was mainly practised between 1870 and 1880 in France and other parts of Europe. Impressionism aimed at the achievement of ever-greater naturalism by analysing tones and colours and rendering the play of light on the surface of objects.
 12. Leiris, M., and Delange, J. op. cit. Pp. 1-2
 13. Gombrich, E.H., op. cit, p. 379
 14. Leiris, M., and Delange, J., op. cit. P.2
 15. Segy, L., op. cit. P. 55
 16. Willett, F., op. cit. P. 84.
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