

Michel heiris

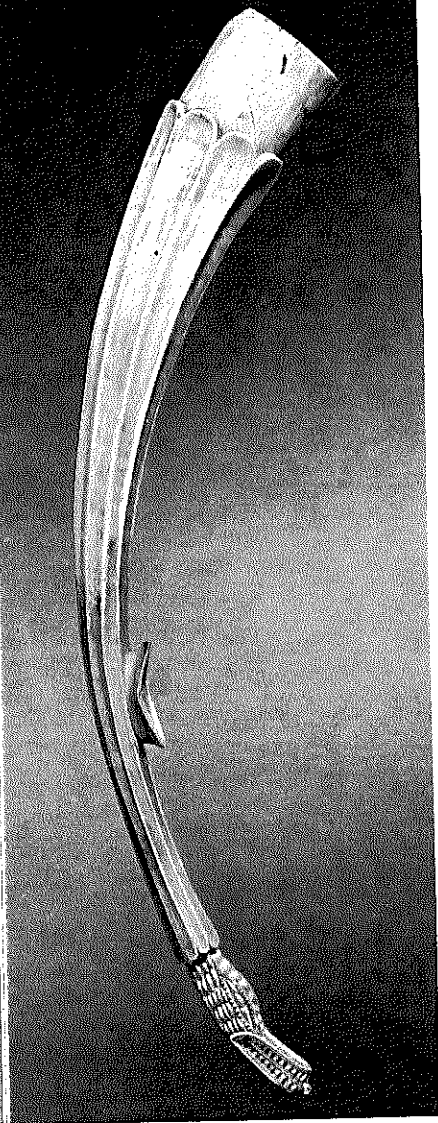
I The discovery of African art in the West

IN THE FIRST PART of the twentieth century Western Europe was the centre of a complete revolution in the plastic arts. In place of naturalist or figurative art, which was not far removed from photographic representation, new styles were being introduced by painters who earned the name of 'cubists' from their early experiments in the representation of volume in a two-dimensional medium. These experiments, made by artists who were not content with perspective and modelling alone, resulted in something quite different from what had been achieved by looking at an object from one angle only or by delineating something which seems to be a perfect illusion of reality.

Concurrently with this art movement, whose greatest exponents lived in Paris, other art movements were also developing, with artists who were expressing themselves much more freely than did the impressionists. For example the fauves used strident colours and bold lines to express their vision. In Germany, there was expressionism, essentially concerned with a vigorous interpretation of the artist's reaction to his subject; in Italy, futurism, aimed at an interpretation of the machine age. A tremendous movement towards emancipation had been launched, with many different and often opposing facets. The greater part of this art is so-called non-figurative and consists of an arrangement of shapes and colours which no longer bear any resemblance to what we see in the everyday world. But there is also the world of surrealism where thematic elements, often unusual in themselves or unusual in juxtaposition to other themes or objects, are of the greatest importance together with the irrational feelings they evoke.

A peculiar enlargement of the aesthetic horizon is noticeable during this same first half century, which was marked towards the end of the First World War by the encroachment of what was to become known as dadaism, something which completely upset the concept of art. Whereas formerly the only esteemed works of art were from

2 - EASTERN CONGO. A Zande village. Drawing by A. de Bar.



3 - YORUBA (?). Side-blown trumpet.
Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

the hands of men who belonged to the so-called civilized world—either Western or Oriental—and who on the whole, were healthy-minded and trained on tradition, a strong interest now arose in the works of individuals who in some way or another do not fit into this category. These are those artists who are only too often regarded as savages or primitives, or who belong to the less educated strata of our society and whose art is mostly termed 'popular' or 'naïve' in contrast to the art of the élite; or those who because of their age are plunged into a special world, the world of childhood; or those whose mental affliction excludes them from the world of normality.

During this aesthetic revolution in the Western world, an event of major importance was the promotion of African art from a mere curiosity to 'art'. The fauves, cubists and expressionists were chiefly responsible for opening up this field of appreciation.

Actually Europe had been interested in the artistic productions of the African races a long time before. 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; and we also know that in 1486 the Portuguese, Diego Cao, collected ivories from the Congo. In the sixteenth century some American and African pieces, including several ivory trumpets, were included among the curiosities owned by the Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, and in 1527 François I, visiting the rich Dieppe ship-builder Jean Ango, was able to admire other strange objects, ivory lance tips and statuettes of African origin.

In the seventeenth century a Jesuit, the Rev. Fr. Athanasius Kircher, founded a museum in Rome (now the Museo Pigorini) notable for its ethnographical collection which today includes the stone statuettes he brought from the Lower Congo in 1695. In 1668, a Dutch geographer, Dapper, gave an



4 - NIGERIA. The capital of the kingdom of Benin.

enthusiastic description of the city of Benin. He described how the inner courts of the royal palace were connected by covered galleries, the pillars of which were ornamented with bronze plaques representing 'battle scenes and warlike deeds,' and he noted that bronze birds surmounted the many turrets which graced the roof. However, for a long time to come Europeans admired only objects made of materials which lent prestige to their owners. In 1704, the Dutchman Bosman wrote that certain fetishes made of gold by the 'Dinkira' (probably the Dunkwa of what is today Ghana) have 'a pleasant air,' and a century later Bowdich, the British envoy to the Ashanti, described the sumptuous ornaments worn by the monarch who received his embassy: 'The king wore a fillet of aggr beads round his temples, a necklace of gold cockspur shells strung by their largest ends, and over his right shoulder a red silk cord, suspending three sapphies cased in gold; his bracelets were the richest mixtures of beads and gold, and his fingers were covered with rings; his cloth was of a dark green silk; a pointed diadem was elegantly painted in white on his forehead; also a pattern

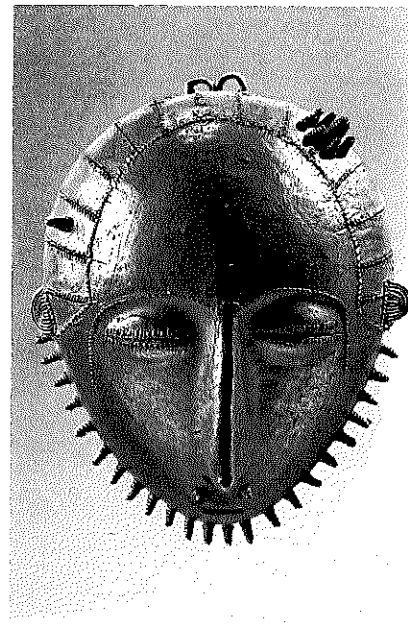


5 - BENIN. *Bronze plaque*. British Museum, London.

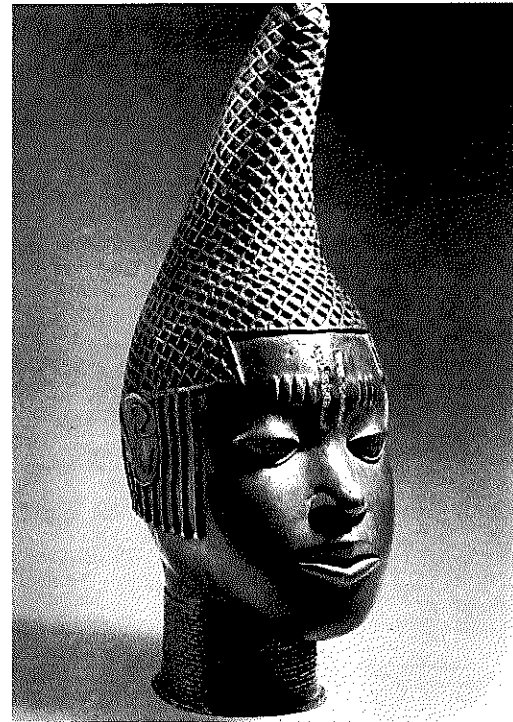
resembling an epaulette on each shoulder and an ornament like a full-blown rose, one leaf rising above another until it covered his whole breast; his knee-bands were of aggy beads, and his ankle strings of gold ornaments of the most delicate workmanship, small drums, sankos, stools, swords, guns, and birds, clustered together (his sandals, of a soft white leather, were embossed across the instep band with small gold and silver cases of sapphies; he was seated in a low chair, richly ornamented with gold; he wore a pair of gold castanets on his finger and thumb, which he clapped to enforce silence...)'

The Scottish doctor Mungo Park had been struck, in the years 1795 to 1797, by the expertise with which the Mandingo smiths worked in gold to make 'diverse ornaments, remarkable for their good taste and craftsmanship.' Similarly, according to Charles Rattou, Ensign Besson, the first commander of the French fort of Grand-Bassam, tells in a report dated 1844 of objects fashioned in gold 'which sometimes show a degree of craftsmanship, and an understanding of proportions, such as are rarely encountered among savage peoples.'

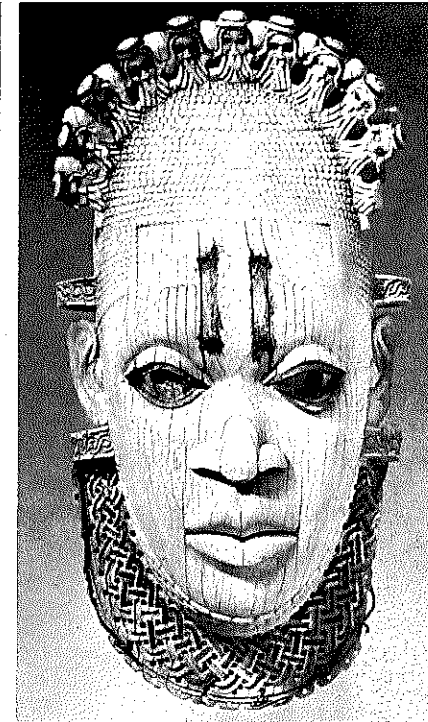
Yet an analysis of African art as such had to wait until Europe had extended its domination over vast regions of Africa and thus narrowed the relations between these two parts of the world. At the end of the last century four works appeared by the German, Leo Frobenius, whose collected oeuvre has led him to be regarded by many African intellectuals as the first European to render the proper homage due to African civilizations. In 1875 his compatriot Georg Schweinfurth had already devoted a work to the 'material' culture of the Zande and other peoples of Central Africa. But the works of Frobenius are the first to be directly concerned with the aesthetic culture of the African races, and in spite of their rather limited ethnographic content, they put him in the rank of a forerunner in this field. Then, in the dawn of our century, the Englishmen Read,



6 - ADJUKRU. *Pendant mask*. Musée de l'Homme.



8 - BENIN. Head of the queen mother. British Museum.



9 - BENIN. Pendant mask. British Museum.

Dalton and Pitt-Rivers, followed a little later by the German, F. von Luschan, discussed the ancient art of Benin, of which numerous examples were brought to England after the British reprisals against this old city, which was already falling into decadence. But, surprised by the quality of the ivories and bronzes, which seemed to the English too sophisticated to be of purely African origin, they attributed them to the influence of Portuguese merchants. However, this theory was rendered useless by the discovery (particularly in Nigeria) of beautiful bronzes produced by the *cire perdue* process before the Portuguese ever made their first contacts with Africa. Moreover, in 1879 the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the first museum devoted entirely to the arts and crafts of non-European peoples, was founded in Paris, and an 'African Museum' (in fact, a very *bric-à-brac* collection) was temporarily installed in the Théâtre du Châtelet at the time of a production entitled *The Black Venus*. Several exhibitions especially devoted to Africa took place in the last years of the

7 - BENIN. Bronze head. British Museum.

century—at Leipzig in 1892, at Antwerp in 1894, at Brussels-Tervuren in 1897 before the establishment of the Belgian-Congo Museum. Then an exhibition of wood carvings, of which at least a part was of African origin, was held at Dresden in 1903 in the noble precincts of the Zwinger.

It may be thought excessive to credit the discovery of African art to those artists who at the beginning of this century were responsible for opening up new horizons; yet it is to them that African sculpture owes its status in our society today.

Maurice de Vlaminck is usually considered to be the first to have recognized African sculpture at its true value. According to his own account, he noticed in 1905 in a bistro in Argenteuil 'two statuettes from Dahomey, daubed with red and yellow ochre and white,' and 'another from the Ivory Coast, all black.' He and André Derain had never regarded the objects displayed at the Musée du Trocadéro as anything more than 'barbarous fetishes.' Now, however, he was profoundly moved by these three statuettes and obtained permission to take them away. A little while later 'a big white mask and two superb statues from the Ivory Coast' were added to his acquisitions; these were given to him by a friend of his father's who said: 'My wife wants to throw these horrors into the rubbish-bin.'

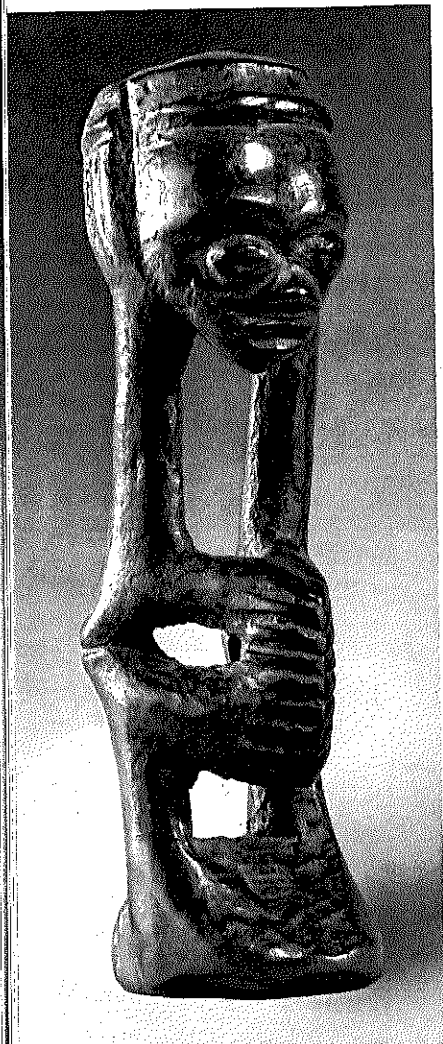
The mask given to Derain came to be seen by Matisse and Picasso, who were completely overwhelmed by it. 'From then on,' wrote Vlaminck, 'there started the great hunt for African art.' He adds that Picasso 'was the first to appreciate what one could gain from African and Oceanic arts, and thenceforth gradually introduced these qualities into his paintings, and in this way started a movement, the novelty of which led people to believe it was revolutionary—*cubism*.'

Vlaminck thus takes the credit for launching the vogue for African art. He maintains that this was the result of recognizing in the statues from Argenteuil something more than mere 'barbarous fetishes,' such as he had seen in the Musée du Trocadéro; later he writes that the white mask, which had both 'enchanted and disturbed' him, had 'revealed [to him] all the primitive grandeur of African art.' Now between the 'barbarous fetishes' and the mask which so 'enchanted and disturbed' him there is not all that much difference. Vlaminck in fact is attributing to Picasso what was the *real* discovery, *viz.*, that African art could prove a source of inspiration to European artists in search of new techniques. However, it is impossible to attribute the birth of cubism, which was really derived from lessons learnt from Cézanne, to a more or less fortuitous incident.

Fauves such as Vlaminck and Derain were anxious to return to original sources and were naturally attracted to those 'primitive' and 'popular' arts which seemed to have been created with an innocent eye and complete lack of sophistication and were so remote in conception from the Graeco-Roman ideals revered ever since the Renaissance. In Vlaminck's paintings, as in those of Amadeo Modigliani a little later, there are traces of the influence of African art, but these are purely stylistic and not the result of a true analysis of the form and line achieved by African sculptors. The

10 - FANG. Reliquary figure. Private collection.





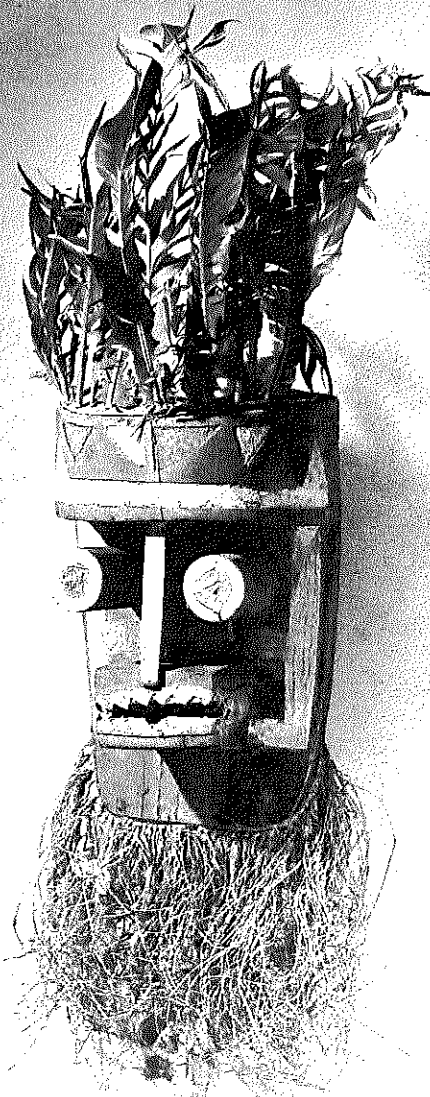
11 - LULUA. Figurine. Private collection.

German expressionists of Die Brücke group, founded by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff at about the same time as Derain and Vlaminck were frequenting the Musée du Trocadéro, also discovered the beauties of the Dresden museum of ethnography and in 1912 Wassily Kandinsky published an article in *Der Blaue Reiter* with several reproductions of African and Oceanic sculpture. But these expressionist artists did not really attempt to understand the fundamental structure of African sculpture either. Their reaction was entirely romantic and they were mainly conscious of what Eckart von Sydow, one of the best known historians of African art, has called 'emotional mystic content'; Sydow maintains that the cubists retained much more of the general architectural character of African sculpture.

In 1906-07, in his *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Picasso defined the form of the head on the right-hand side of the picture by colour applied in parallel stripes instead of by chiaroscuro. This was the beginning of cubism. With this picture, for which he had made many studies on a smaller scale, Picasso inaugurated his 'African period,' characterized by heads with violently stressed features, reminiscent of the African masks known at the time. But the period when Picasso's work, and later that of his colleagues, was most deeply influenced by African art was when 'analytic cubism' (where form was achieved by delineating an object from several different angles simultaneously) was succeeded by 'synthetic cubism'. This amounted to a new 'writing' by which a concept of space is obtained on a flat surface by the invention of new symbols, and which rejects any compromise such as a combination of superimposed or juxtaposed lifelike images.

In 1913-14 Picasso made constructions out of various different materials which, according to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the historian of cubism, mark a complete breakaway from anything previously produced in Europe. Indeed, far from being

12 - GREBO. Mask. Musée de l'Homme.





compact structures with an unbroken surface, these constructions, in which volume is expressed not by mass but by the relation between well-defined planes, rely as much on space as on solidity. Not that they are, as it were, 'open-work' sculptures, but as far as the subject depicted is concerned, they can be classed as figurative. The most typical example of this way of sculpting (also practised by Georges Braque with his paper constructions which unfortunately have not survived) is the still-life made from corrugated paper in 1913, entitled *Guitar and Bottle*, whose most striking aspect is the hole in the centre of the guitar, represented, not by a hollow, but by a cylinder in relief.

At this period Picasso owned a mask from the region of Sassandra on the Ivory Coast, one of a type whose most outstanding features are as follows: the face is represented on a flat or slightly concave surface; between a bulging forehead and a protuberant parallelepiped mouth is a long thin piece of wood representing the nose, while two cylindrical or conical pieces of wood, attached by their narrowest ends, represent the eyes, which in certain examples protrude beyond the other features. Here we have a combination of quasi-geometrical components which at first appear to be unrelated, but which, when the mask is seen as a face, are part of the whole. The result is all the more striking in that it avoids both the false realism of a cast made from nature and the slightly deformed 'naturalism' common to most European sculpture in the round. It was this mask which gave Picasso the idea of using a hole to express relief, and its unequivocal realism and truly expressive composition were of enormous use to him and other cubists in their experiments during those years.

During the 'analytic' period (1910-12), pictorial use of superimposed planes was the first step on the road to rejecting what may be termed 'illusionist' methods of representation. All the same, if representational imitation was dispensed with in the overall composition, it was present in details, because no original symbols had yet been invented to replace it. The mask in question is a perfect example of a work presenting an aggregate of perfectly comprehensible forms, but which are in fact symbols. They are far less imitations of nature than they seem at first sight. Here was the key which opened the road to 'synthetic' cubism.

In reaction to the impressionists, who were only interested in light and who ended by painting pictures in which the only subjects that interested them were those that showed fluctuations of light, in reaction also against the too sinuous line of Art Nouveau, the cubists opted for a manner of painting with a much stronger basic framework and chose as subjects those which had a quality of permanence and avoided everything ephemeral. Thus, instead of confining themselves to more or less decorative pictures or to creating an illusion of the outside world as seen through the human eye, the cubists re-cast completely the accepted ideas of visual imagery. Their need for a new 'handwriting' is sufficient in itself to explain why these artists were drawn to arts hitherto unacclaimed. Just as many of their predecessors had turned towards the art of the Far East because it had certain affinities with their

own, such as love of nature, attention to detail, taste and decorative effect, the cubists turned towards the art of so-called primitive peoples, in particular to that of Africa, because of its positive affinities, and not just for the sake of exoticism.

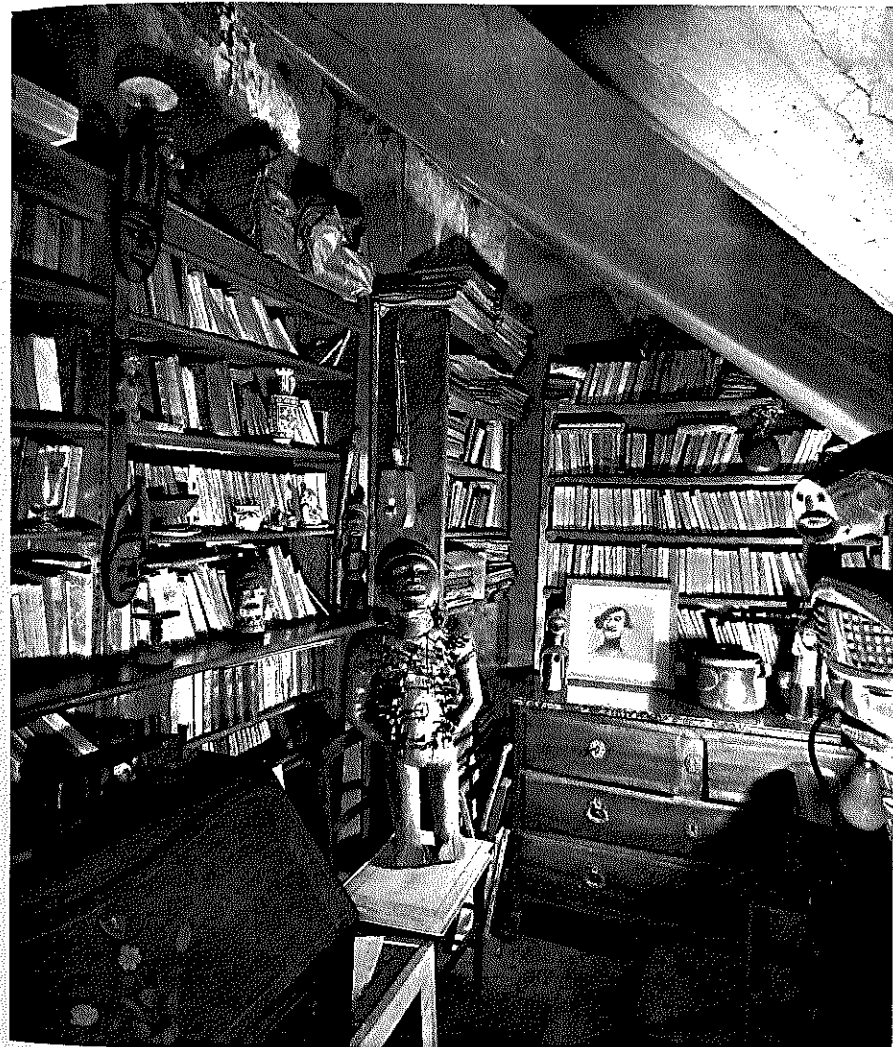
Cubism aimed less at imitating than establishing reality. It disclaimed all virtuosity and demanded that the connections within a work of art should be independent of the logical connections between objects in real life; one of its main objectives was to organize forms into a coherent whole by analogy, contrast, balance and rhythm. This brings cubism morphologically close to the African sculpture known at that time, and its champions were therefore completely in sympathy with these wooden carvings which also avoided 'naturalism' and everything not relative to the essential, and which were filled with a powerful rhythmic quality. These could be accepted as perfect models inasmuch as they were not made simply to please nor as vehicles to demonstrate the skill of the sculptor. They have, moreover, the supreme quality of being 'truer than the truth', something which can never be achieved by merely copying nature.

African masks and statues, like guitars, which were admired for their clear lines, their functional purpose and their poetic associations, were long to be typical decorations of studios. In 1912 Guillaume Apollinaire, friend of the cubists, wrote a poem partly autobiographical, partly manifesto, in which he describes 'the fetishes from Oceania and Guinea' in his apartment at Auteuil as 'Christs of another form and of another faith' (*des Christ d'une autre forme et d'une autre croyance*), 'lesser Christs of obscure hopes' (*Christ inférieurs des obscures espérances*)—lines which run through his poem like a theme song of the times. He also accompanied Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia (who were later to play important rôles in the dadaist movement) to the Théâtre Antoine to see a play by Raymond Roussel based on his *Impressions d'Afrique*, a highly romantic novel with an African background of sheer fantasy which was to become known later as one of the great literary works of the surrealist movement.

In the same year an exhibition of African art was held at the Folkwang Museum at Hagen in Germany. Two years later another exhibition was held in New York at the gallery belonging to Alfred Stieglitz, a photographer and dealer in modern art, who was also editor of *Camera Work* and later of a magazine called *291*; his contributors included Picabia (who once gave the apparently gratuitous title of *Chanson nègre* to one of his pictures). In 1916, the painter Marius de Zayas, an ex-associate of Stieglitz, organized an exhibition at the Modern Gallery, New York, and in the following year African sculpture made, as it were, its official début on the Parisian art market in an exhibition at the Galerie Paul Guillaume.

In 1912, when Apollinaire wrote his poem *Zone*, where for the first time the African theme appears in his work, he was still regarding African and Oceanic sculptures as primitive fetishes, dignifying them with the title of 'Christs', only to relegate them immediately to some obscure level of religious thought. Five years later, however,

14 - Guillaume Apollinaire's study.



in an article published in *Le Mercure de France*, Apollinaire seems to have gained a better appreciation of African art. It seemed to him to have 'an undeniable kinship with Egyptian art from which it is derived, unless, of course, the opposite is the case and it was African art which influenced the craftsmen of Egypt, something which undoubtedly justifies the interest attached to these works today'.

In 1915 *Negerplastik*, a short work by Carl Einstein, appeared in Leipzig. This was ethnographically very slight but aesthetically important, because Einstein stressed the principal qualities of African sculpture in relation to certain problems with which the more thoughtful European artists were faced. Its solid structure which asserts its spatial identity and the perfect integration of its components, each of which is a separate entity but which combined together make a whole, are due, according to Einstein, to the fact that the work of African sculptors, who are performing a religious duty, is an attempt to realize a transcendental image and not just to create an effect.

African sculpture alone resolves the fundamental problem of the expression of volume, of mass and its spatial relation to its environment. With rare exceptions western sculpture is on the wrong road, because it attempts to produce an effect on the spectator. This has led to the use of a more or less descriptive technique, a 'pictorial substitute', tending towards an arrangement of surfaces rather than a real organization of masses. On the other hand African sculptors make 'true' sculpture because a statue for them is 'a mythical reality and self-contained' and in order to make it they must employ other means than 'vague optical suggestions' and are obliged to resolve the crucial question by 'cubic' construction (*das Kubische*), in other words, to manipulate volumes in a way that immediately produces a three-dimensional quality. That this is a question of structural composition and not of

15 - DINKA. Statue. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

mass, may be observed in some of those extremely slender, or even completely pared down statues which are common to many parts of Africa.

A statue which is a god, or at least the receptacle for a deity, can only be 'an object in itself' and cannot be the artificial result of the caprice of one individual. This applies to the parts as well as the whole, which explains why each part is autonomous and has its own meaning and not the meaning the spectator might read into it. The integration of disparate parts is a consequence of the need to give to the whole 'the closed hermetic form which endows it with its unique reality'.

Einstein has thus demonstrated the values of African sculpture, at least in its most usual aspect. Yet he did not explain why, in the art of Oceania, which is also religious, other qualities are outstanding, especially the exuberance of its invention which so aroused the admiration of the surrealists, just as the rigorous structure of African art was enthusiastically welcomed by the cubists.

After this analysis by Einstein came the homage paid by one of the principal promoters of dadaism. At Zurich a small group of painters and writers who used to meet in the Cabaret Voltaire contributed a provocative atmosphere to the artistic scene with their fanciful tomtoms and mock 'African Negro songs'. In 1917 the poet Tristan Tzara, one of the most talented of this group, writing in the revue *Sie*, emphasized the importance of the vertical line and symmetry in African sculpture and observed that an African sculptor, 'by concentrating his vision on the head... loses the conventional connexion between it and the rest of the body'. He also defined synthetically what seemed to him the most important quality of African art, *i.e.* to 'construct a balanced hierarchy'.

A year earlier another avant-garde poet, Blaise Cendrars, wrote several brief poems interwoven with African themes, including *Continent noir* and *Les Grands Fétiches*. Their titles and the final colophon

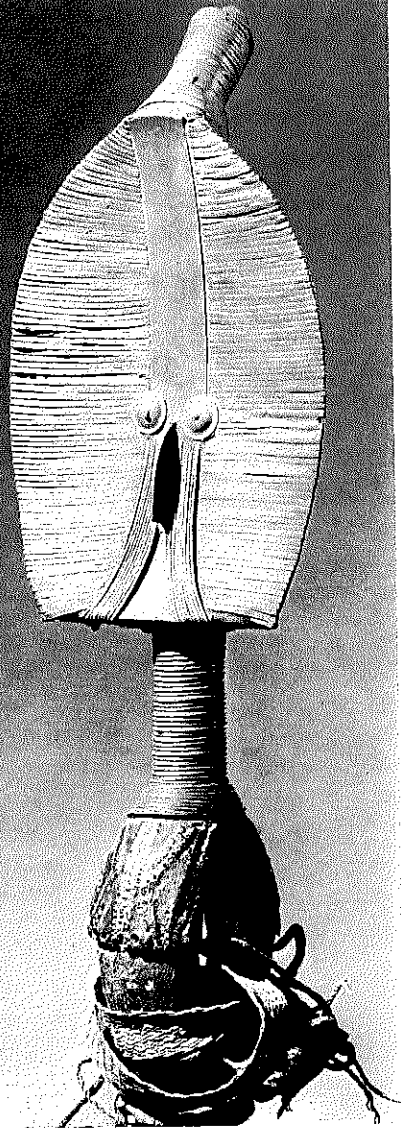


16 - DINKA. Statue (detail).



18 - BAULE. *Mask*. Private collection.

17 - SALAMPASU. *Statuette*. Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren.

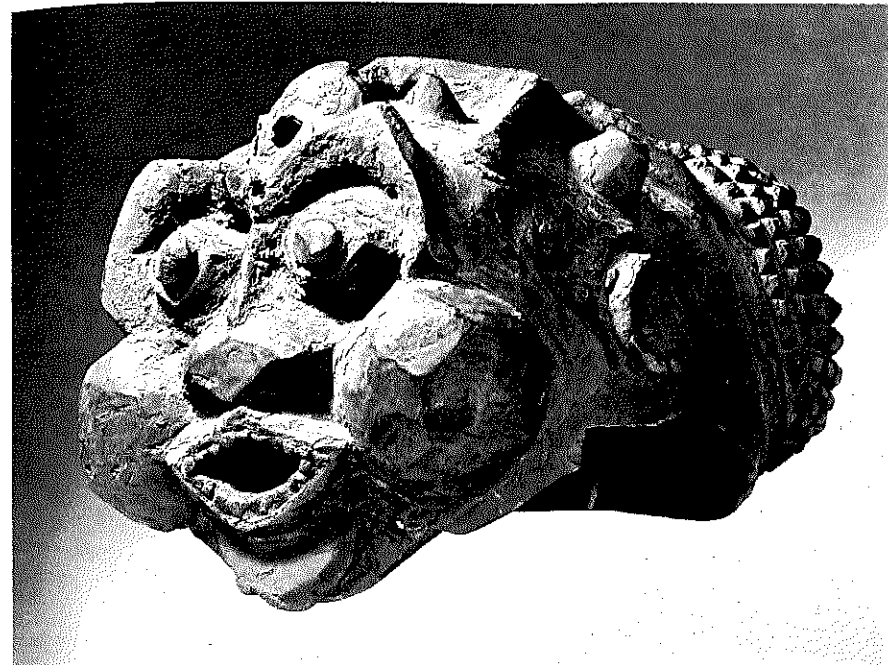


19 - KOTA. Reliquary figure. Musée de l'Homme.

['British Museum, London, 1916', show that they were directly inspired by African sculpture. In the same year a work by Marius de Zayas appeared in New York under the title *African Negro Art: its Influence on Modern Art*.

In 1919, when life had as yet scarcely recovered from the First World War, an exhibition devoted to African and Oceanic arts was held in Paris at the Galerie Devambez which attracted many visitors. This gallery published *L'Art nègre et l'Art océanien* by Henri Clouzot and André Level, the first book in French to deal with the subject, while the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which is far from being an avant-garde review, published another article on African art by these same two authors. At the same time there appeared in Russia an article by the painter Vladimir Matvei, who died in 1914, a year before the appearance of *Negerplastik*, entitled *Iskusstvo Negrov* and signed 'W. Markov'. From then on, interest in this subject continued to grow.

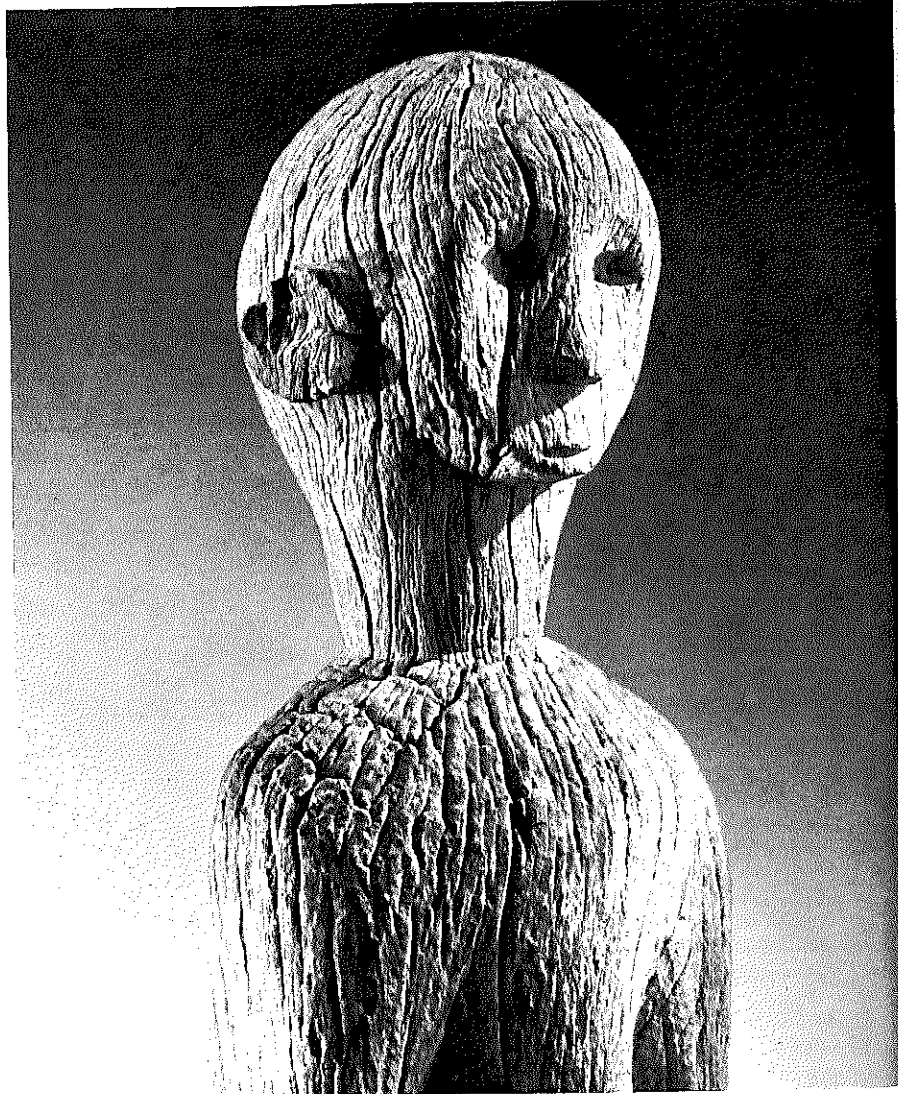
In 1920 other publications appeared which show that African art, and equally African literature, were subjects that appealed to an increasingly wide public. In Paris, for example, another article by Clouzot and Level appeared in the review *L'Amour de l'Art*. Kurt Wolff, the Munich publisher, re-edited *Negerplastik*, while the Delphin Verlag published *Expressionismus* by Hermann Bahr, in which the author reproduced three African sculptures which he considered relevant to expressionism and comparable with the works of Western artists. In Zurich and Munich Wilhelm Hausenstein published a collection of stories and reproductions of exotic sculpture, among which are examples of African work. In England, an exhibition of African sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club prompted Roger Fry to write an article; his colleague Clive Bell also dealt with the subject of African art in two further articles, and the very serious *Burlington Magazine* opened its doors to the French poet André Salmon who wrote on the same subject.



20 - BAFUM. Hood mask. Private collection.

When Blaise Cendrars' *Anthologie nègre* was published in 1921 it attracted the attention of the educated public. This work is devoted to the oral literature of different regions of Africa and has a much larger choice of texts than those provided by Frobenius in his *Der schwarze Dekameron*, published in Berlin a few years before the war. In this same year of 1920 there was sufficient interest in the subject for the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, which was responsible for editing the *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, to publish *Enquête sur les arts lointains* by Clouzot and Level, while *Action*, a review concerned with literature and modern art, produced in its third issue various contributions under the title of *'Opinions sur l'art nègre.'*

Among the contributors to this article were Paul Guillaume, Victor Goloubeff the orientalist, as well as Vlaminck and the three greatest cubist artists, Picasso, Juan Gris and the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz. There were also poets such as André Salmon, Jean Cocteau, Jean Pellerin and Paul Dermée, and also the mighty shade of Apollinaire, dead a year since, but here represented by an extract from his paper devoted



to the fetishist sculpture of the African Negroes written in 1917.

With regard to Picasso's contribution, *Action* confined itself to ascribing to him the following words: 'Negro art? Don't know it!' Was this an admission of incompetence; a refusal to recognize as 'art' (in the current sense of the word) the productions of Africa; a jeer directed at those who, with no positive means of ascribing a date to an object, had set themselves up as art historians and made a distinction between different 'periods'; a reaction against the use of the term 'Negro art' (a vague term and, above all, meretricious since it postulates a link between a certain type of art and a certain colour of skin)? These are perhaps some interpretations which could be given to Picasso's quip, the authenticity of which in any case is doubtful.

Cocteau for his part seemed to envisage the problem only from the point of view of aesthetic. His contribution, according to *Action*, consisted only of the assertion that the African crisis had become just as much of a bore as the Japonism of Mallarmé. Paul Guillaume, on the other hand, loudly proclaimed his enthusiasm. Other contributions were more substantial in content. André Salmon wrote: 'The African artists are realists whose meticulous sense of duty is similar to that of builders intent on achieving unity and harmony of proportion.'

Although all accessories may disappear, destroyed by time or sacrificed to taste or prudery, or to the barbarism of Europeans, the unity of a statue is undiminished, the premeditated harmony remains intact.'

André Salmon thus emphasizes the realist and at the same time constructivist tendencies of most African sculptors, and alludes to the degradation suffered by many objects mutilated by their European owners (who cut off, for example, a too obvious penis), and often stripped of what were regarded as superfluous ornaments and accessories. Goloubeff showed that he was aware of a feature of African

21 - LOBI. Head and bust of large statue.

22 - LOBI. Large statue. Private collection.





24 - DOGON. *Status*. Private collection.

sculptures of which there are many moving examples: the survival of the tree in its metamorphosis into a statue. He writes: 'African art is a pact between man and the forest. The forest lends man its lasting beauties so that he may turn them into gods; but the forest tells him "make these gods in my image"'. For his part Vlaminck pointed out that 'African art achieves by simple means an impression of grandeur and immobility,' thus stressing the ability of African sculptors to convey a sense of monumental proportion to generally quite small objects. Lipchitz's contribution is of some historic interest: 'Certainly African artists have been a great example to us. Their very real understanding of proportion, their feeling for design and acute sense of reality has led us to perceive, even to dare, many things...'

From these quotations it is clear that for Western artists the work of their African colleagues was more of an encouragement and a pointer than a lesson in the strict sense of the word. On the other hand it shows that the controversy between the

23 - TIKAR (?). *Large mask*. Rietberg Museum, Zurich.

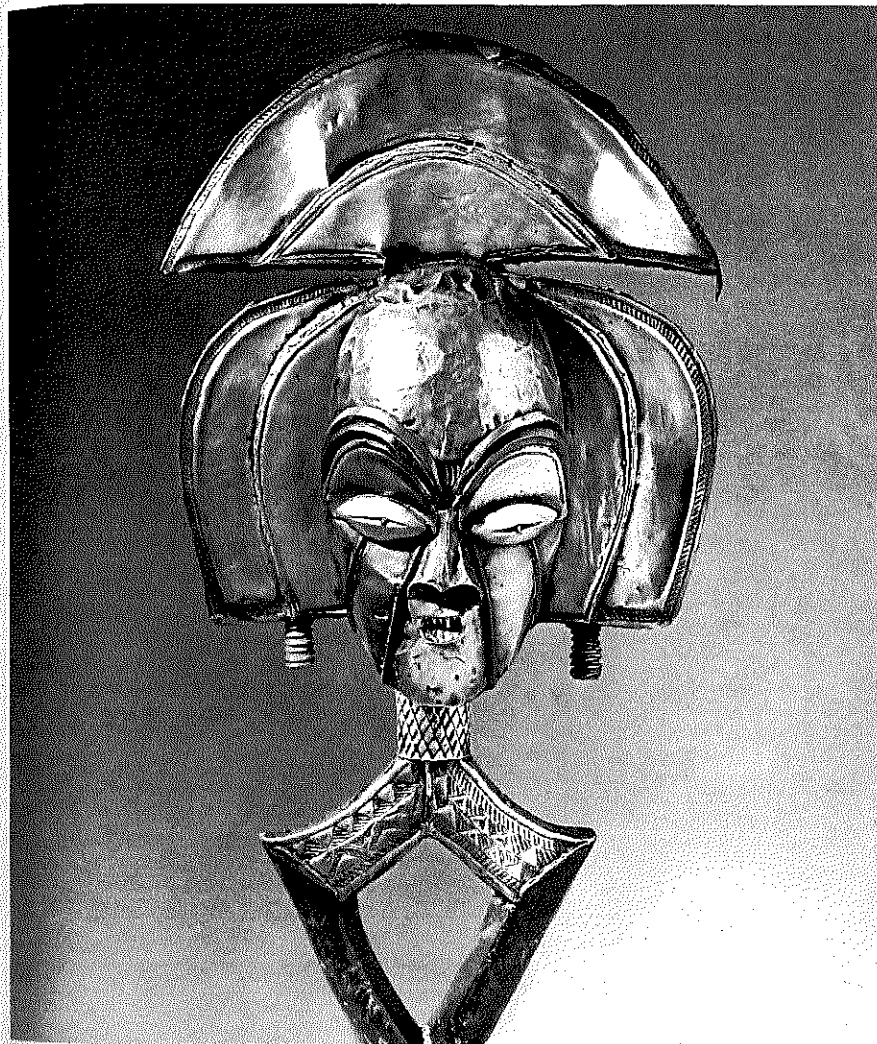


partisans of naturalism and their opponents can be nothing more than a dialogue between the dumb. Where the philistine sees nothing but an ignorance of anatomy, childishness and clumsiness, and an inability to reproduce reality, a cubist discovers proof that Africans know how to create correctly proportioned works (in the sense that they are harmonious in themselves and not in the sense that they conform to natural proportions), and that they can fashion them with a vitality and elegance which bears no resemblance to scientific exactitude, with the result that they are more convincing than any mere simulacrum.

Juan Gris contrasts the idealization typical of classical Greek art with the spirit of African sculpture: 'African sculpture is a striking proof of the possibility of creating an *anti-idealistic* art. Animated by a religious spirit, these sculptures are varied and precise manifestations of high principles and of general ideas. How is it possible not to accept an art which has thus succeeded in individualizing what is general and done so each time in a different way? It is the opposite of Greek art which used the individual as a means to suggest an ideal type.'

Thus Gris is all in favour of African art because here he finds an answer to what were to be his main preoccupations as a painter: to proceed by deduction from the general to the particular and not by induction (which is what Cézanne tried to do when he hoped to 'make a Poussin from nature'); not to seek to extract an essence from something which is merely accidental, but to set out to define form, which is conceived first as a geometrical abstract and later realized as a definite object. It is a process analogous to that by which the African sculptor passes from the idea of a god or ancestor to the figure that embodies it; this is the very reverse of the classical Greek ethos, whereby the creation of a deity was inspired by a human model. So we find Gris agreeing with the most famous of African poets writing in French, Léopold Sédar Senghor, whom

25 - SENUFO. 'Pestle statue'. Private collection.



26 - KOTA. Reliquary figure. Private collection.



27 - DAN. Mask. Private collection.

I once heard describe African civilizations as civilizations of 'incarnate ideas' and who has written that art in Africa 'is a palpable contact with the underlying reality of the universe' (*participation sensible à la réalité qui sous-tend l'univers*).

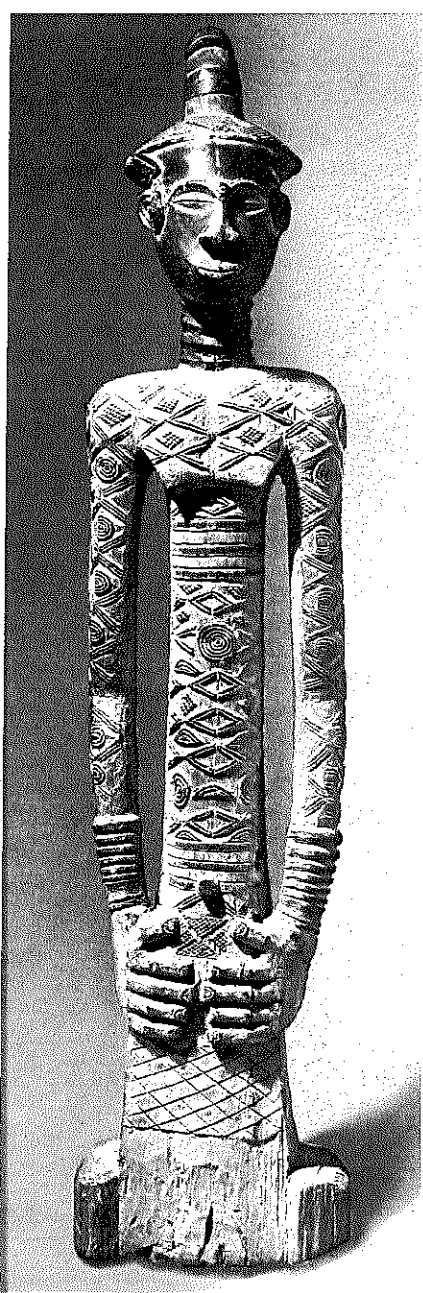
From the many various opinions which appeared in *Action*, one important point at least emerges. In *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* Arthur de Gobineau recognizes that 'among African peoples, sensibility (without which there can be no art) is developed to the highest degree', but he also maintains that only by alliance with white races can this potential be fully developed. Since de Gobineau's essay, however, the whole picture has been reversed; it is, on the contrary, Western artists who have turned to Africa for inspiration.

In 1920, when Cocteau, standing slightly on the fringe, had denounced what he called the 'African crisis', he was not referring so much to African art as to its cult in certain social circles. However, this 'crisis', which to him was already a bore, had nowhere nearly reached its peak.

In 1921 an exhibition of African sculpture was held at the thirteenth International Exhibition of Art in Venice and in the same year Carl Einstein in Berlin published his second book, which was ethnographically much better informed than the first. Here he declares, 'the more one interests oneself in African art, the more one is filled with painful doubts which counsel caution'—a modest assertion not borne out by the text! Also in the same year the Prix Goncourt was awarded to a West Indian, René Maran, for his novel *Batouala*, which pictures the life of the Banda people in the region of the Ubangi-Shari.

In 1922 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who had already outlined his theories in *Les Fonctions mentales dans les Sociétés inférieures*, published *La Mentalité primitive* where, although the comparison between 'primitive' and 'civilized' mentalities is treated too schematically (as the author came to recognize at the end

28 - NDENGSE. Large commemorative effigy. M.R.A.C., Tervuren.



of his life), he does at least make the point that the behaviour of peoples usually regarded as 'primitive' is consistent with a coherent way of thought.

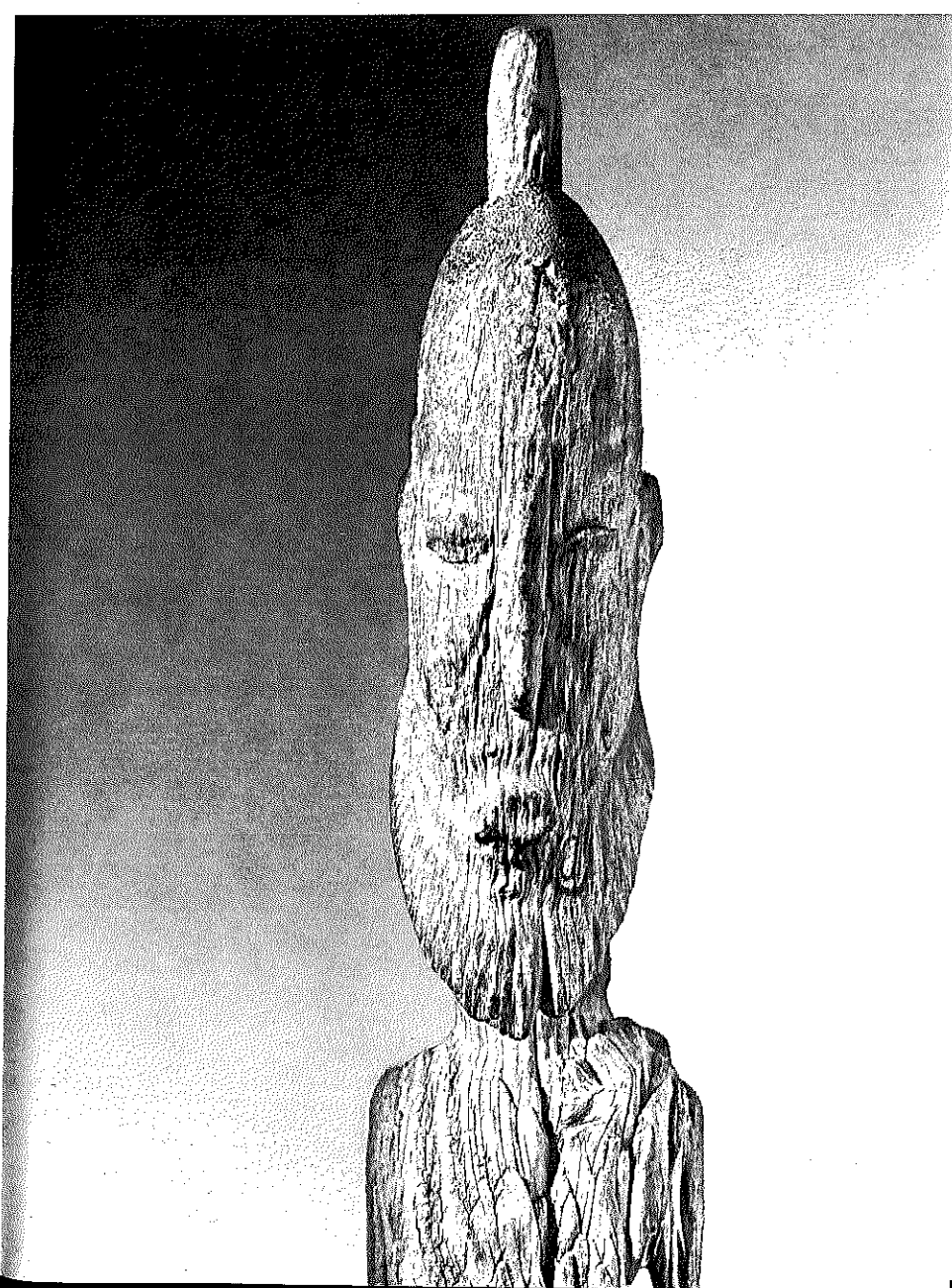
In the same year two very popular works appeared by Maurice Delafosse, one of the great pioneers in the field of African studies. The first is primarily a history of Africa south of the Sahara; the second is a short anthology of the oral literature of the same regions. These two little books, together with one which followed in 1925 describing the life of African agricultural communities, gave the possibility to many readers, ignorant and informed alike, to reach a better understanding of the peoples who for so long had been regarded as intellectual inferiors.

In the United States in 1922 an exhibition was held at the Brummer Gallery, New York, which was followed after an interval of a year by one at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. In Paris an exhibition (*L'Art indigène des colonies françaises d'Afrique et d'Océanie et du Congo belge*) was organized in the Pavillon de Marsan, and in the same month the Swedish Ballet Company presented a ballet based on a theme by Cendrars. Darius Milhaud composed the music, Fernand Léger designed the décor and costumes, and Jean Börlin was choreographer. The premiere of this ballet at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 25 October 1923 marks an important date in the story of the diffusion of African art. Here was a great Parisian soirée dedicated aesthetically to the mythology of Africa, just as on 28 May 1913 Igor Stravinsky's famous *Sacre du Printemps* had been dedicated by the Ballets Russes to the pagan rites of Europe.

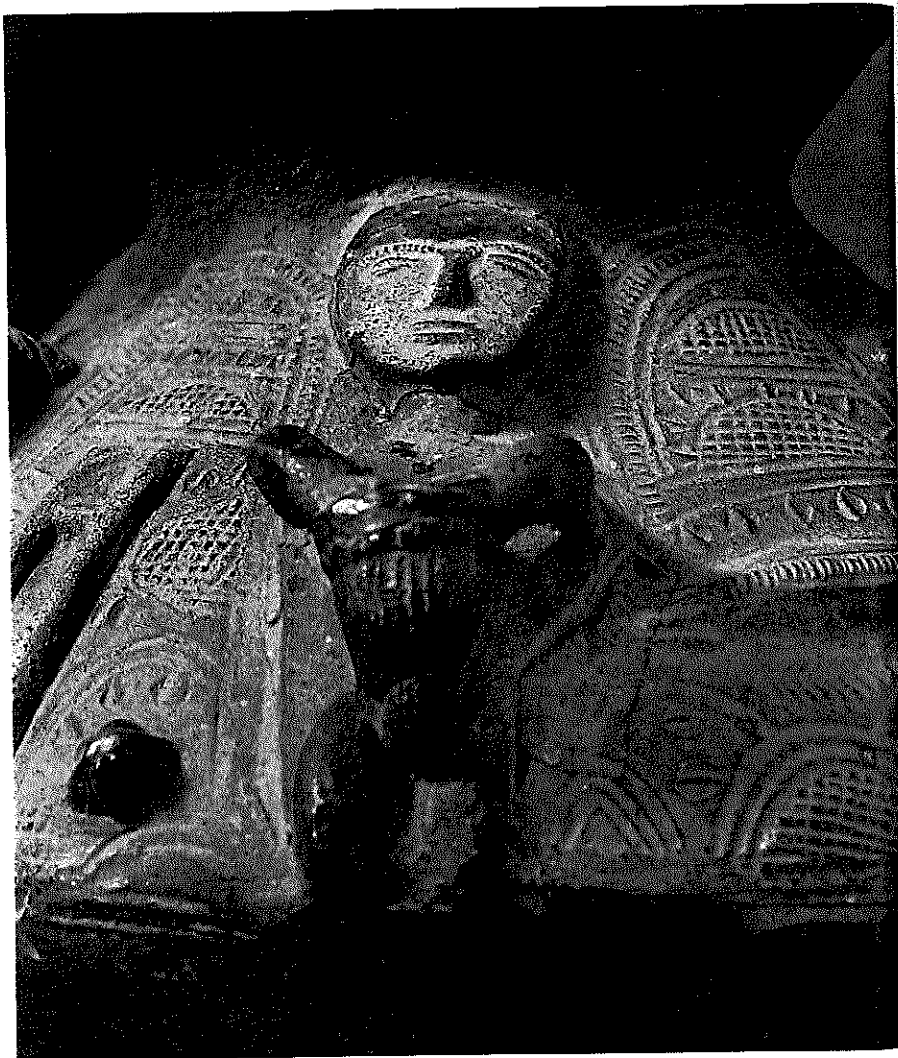
In this same year (1923) *Das unbekannte Afrika* by Leo Frobenius appeared in Munich, and *Ashanti* by Captain R. S. Rattray was published in Oxford. This was the first of a series of great classical works on African ethnography. 1923 was also a famous date in the history of Afro-American music-hall, for it was then that an entirely American Negro revue, *Dover Street to Dixie*, was presented at the



29 - SENUFO. Statuette. Private collection.



30 - DOGON. Head of a large ancestor statue. Private collection.



31 - ASYANTI. Ritual vase (detail). Private collection.

London Pavilion. This show, the first of its kind to be exported from the United States to this side of the Atlantic, was followed in 1925 by the *Revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a show dedicated to jazz which had a resounding success in Paris. This revue was produced in a theatre which had already opened its doors to negroes with W. H. Wellmon's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, who alternated pure jazz and dance music with Negro spirituals and the plantation songs which were soon also to be in fashion. It featured as leading lady Josephine Baker, who in consequence rapidly rose to become a great Parisian star.

The African influence on Europe in this century is most noticeable in our leisure activities, especially in our dances, mainly derived from Afro-American sources. The discovery of African art by fauves, cubists and expressionists certainly played a part in the development of modern Western art, but all in all, it has perhaps not really affected our way of life.

Jazz and the dances associated with it, together with Afro-American folk music, are all composite products owing much to Western influences, and African sculpture, itself the product of civilizations developed over many years, has a purely illusory simplicity; so it is wrong to see nothing in these art forms other than a refreshing originality. Like the music, profane or religious, that seemed like a faint breeze wafted from distant Africa into the midst of our industrial civilization, so the image of a Josephine Baker, abandoning herself to the rhythm of the Charleston, evoked something primitive akin to the *Christ inférieur des obscures espérances* of Apollinaire. Certainly during the past ten years the appreciation of African culture had become much more extensive and thorough. Numerous publications and exhibitions, both official and private, as well as documentary films (although too many of these laid stress on the picturesque 'savage' aspect) made the life of African peoples familiar to the educated Western world. Today none of these peoples can be regarded as 'primitive' and it is recognized that many have a highly developed sense of values. Even so there are many Western people, even those who have no racial prejudices, for whom African aesthetics remain marginal. To them the very idea of comparing a 'fetish' with an Apollo or a medieval Virgin, or even an Egyptian god or a Buddha, is repugnant. And even when one accepts the fact that African art can be regarded as 'art' in the fullest sense of the word, there is always an unavoidable gap in any civilization between theory and practice, if only for the simple reason that theory, even when unanimously and intelligently accepted, will not necessarily be accepted emotionally. One wonders how African art would have fared if it had not been labelled 'primitive', and if instead of being considered 'instinctive' it had been appreciated as the product of intelligent thought.