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ART OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS: 2000 YERS OF NIGERIAN

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Occasional Paper No. 23

## INTRODUCTION

The arrival in this country of "2000 Years of Nigerian Art" has occasioned considerable, if belated, admiration from newspaper art critics; towards the art they have long ignored. Their respect is expressed in a tone of surprise that indicates a re-appraisal rather than a confirmation of judgement. Apparently approval has shocked instinctive expectations.

Such laggard allies support those who have long fought to elevate African art from the ethnographical collections into the galleries of art, and they may be grateful for this new publicity.

The response of the press and the publicity it engenders, will securely establish Africa as a field of art. It will now be acceptable to admire without qualification. An audience as extensive as those who queued to admire King Tut or the ancient Chinese excavations, will be stimulated by a first impression of an area equally unfamiliar. The motives for attendance may well owe as much to fashion as any determination for a different understanding, but there is nothing wrong with that. First discovery may well stimulate an attentive enthusiasm from which a deeper awareness and understanding may develop.

There is surely an extraordinary paradox; that the audience drawn to this exciting show through media attention will encounter an art very different than they might have anticipated and for this discrepancy the more expert may be responsible. Those who have preached the distinction of African art have tended to emphasize the ways it differs from the expectations of classic Western aesthetics. To assist understanding emphasis has been placed on the connection between the styles of contemporary Western art and African forms. That Picasso was significantly influenced by African sources has become a truism of college courses in Art History.

Surprisingly this history will help little in the appreciation of the present collection, either for those who have gained that rather elementary understanding of cultural borrowings, or those to whom contemporary art itself remains as exotic and incomprehensible as any other artifact. It remains fascinating to consider how the arguments, developed to explain African art over the last few years of enlightenment, may be only minimally applicable to the present display. They would have been most helpful if applied to the last major African show in this city, "100 Masterpieces of Art from Zaire". That art, impressive as it was, tended to confirm the theories more exactly than the present display.

The commonly propounded approaches to African art seem confounded by the very works acclaimed as its finest exemplification. Their very distinction has proved remarkably unrepresentative. This occurs at a far more fundamental level than any general admission that masterpieces within any culture are less indicative of the stylistic norm than more commonplace works. Confronted by this exhibition generalizations about African art prove wanting. This is both the distinction and the paradox of the show.

Common consensus has detected a somewhat simplistic quadruplet; the four characteristics which tend to mark the features of African art:

Firstly, African art is rarely antique. Art works decay in the climatic conditions and new pieces carved in the same forms are equally acceptable to generate the "affecting

presence". This challenges the European reverence for age as a component of admirable art.

Secondly, African art styles are metaphoric rather than descriptive. It is rarely realistic. Counterexamples are usually dismissed as being intended for tourists or merely not seriously intended.

Thirdly, there is the lingering sense of African art as being "primitive". African pieces are crudely fashioned, and there-fore "strong" in impact. This is a view tenaciously held even when demonstrably opposed by innumerable examples of a contrary sophistication and complexity in much African carving. Fourthly, no matter its cultural merits African art lacks technical skills because it is fashioned by simple implements.

If these ideas are obviously questionable in detail, they do not falsely represent the more general belief. The pieces on display in the Nigerian show deliberately and ostentatiously break all these rules we have been taught as distinguishing African art from European. Here we see an art that is realistic in form, classical in style, finished to perfection, advanced in technical skill. Every element assumed to represent qualities unique to Africa are expressly negated by major works.

For those of us involved in the field a piquant paradox results. The usual moiety of information concerning African art will prove less appropriate a preparation for this particular show than absolute ignorance. It seems highly ironic that the large audience lured to this presentation by fashion-able acclaim will be as well equipped for appreciation by ignorance as by some prior learning. Unsullied by partial knowledge, their admiration in this case can be direct and uncomplicated. On the one hand this exhibition, by its majesty, requires the experiencer to re-examine our presuppositions. For others, assumptions are confirmed rather than challenged. That wider audience, attracted by this important show, will be less surprised because in many aspects it does look like other classical art. They will find the confirmation of universality rather than geographic exclusivity. The heads recall (as Frobenius inappropriately observed) classical Greek work. The complex vases are like the finest examples of Chinese bronzes. The very excellence indicates that African art can be closely linked to the creativity of the world. Those who have so reasonably and energetically expended time and duty expositing on its distinctive nature, will surely find it wryly ironic that the climax of brilliance evidenced by this show reverses what they have so reasonably and confidently taught. It is an intriguing paradox out of which may spring a new understanding for specialists and casual viewers both.

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## METROPOLITAN MYOPIA AND THE MYTH OF ANTICUITY IN NIGERIAN ART STUDIES

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In 1961, the Oxford University Press published in book form a series of BRC lectures under the title *The Dawn of African History*. We can infer that the book was aimed at a general audience because it is a paperback, has neither footnotes nor bibliography, and featured an introductory chapter by an authentic superstar of archaeology, Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Although Wheeler's essay was apparently intended to focus on key aspects of the stone age in Africa, and to set the scene for later developments, the first sentence of the first paragraph is ominous for Africanists: "Asia is the undisputed homeland of civilization: Africa may well be the homeland of man himself." The rest is fairly innocuous, until we get to the final two paragraphs, from which I quote:

"This brief survey would be incomplete and indeed unfair if it did not refer to two outstanding achievements of West Africa in the field of art and craftsmanship. Negro craftsmanship as a whole rarely rises above the level of what may be called, a little patronizingly, 'folk art'. But Nigeria has produced two notable groups of sculptures far above the folk-art level."

Not surprisingly, these "outstanding achievements" are the brass castings of Ife and Benin. The former "are vivid and masterly representations, with a combined restraint and naturalism that remind one in skill of the best portraiture of Dynastic Egypt." Further, while "a few of the Benin bronzes are reminiscent of the Ife heads,...they never attain to the same standard of artistry."

Comparable rankings of African art -- though rarely so unequivocal or unabashed -- are evident in most programs of research, exhibition, and publication: Ife is placed at the top, Benin at some variable distance below, the rest of Nigeria next, and then the rest of sculpture-producing Africa. Since the center of gravity of African art studies is generally acknowledged to be located in the United States, it is difficult not to associate the emergence of this gradient with increasingly heavy American involvement in the field since the early 1960's. To be specific: until recently, American students of African art tended to gravitate to Nigeria because of the richness, density, and vitality of the traditions it encompasses --and because most of their bibliographical and field-research could be conducted in the English language. But, in addition, for those investigating more recent arts, there is a reassuring proximity to the very old. African art specialists are not alone in placing a high value upon the probable longevity of the things they study, as a way of rationalizing their investment of mental and physical energy, time and money. In an extreme form, however, this impulse can transform mere age into the Myth of Antiquity to which my title refers. Symptoms of this reflex can include translation of cultural values into commodity values based on "authenticity", rarity, or materials of manufacture -- perhaps most clearly seen in gallery or auction price-structures. Or judgements of significance may be based upon conformity to alien standards of aesthetic quality of the sort that clearly underlie Sir Mortimer Wheeler's pronouncements, quoted earlier.

In any case, a recurrent complaint was heard at last year's Fifth Triennial Symposium on Traditional African Art: Nigeria -- particularly southwestern Nigeria -- continues to receive a disproportionate share of attention. As a Nigerian specialist, my first impulse was to attribute this complaint to sour grapes -- we just have more to work on than they do, and so much of it is so spectacularly appealing from an aesthetic point of view. Moreover, a lot is even old, at least compared to the rest of Africa. On reflection, however, I am forced to concede that my non-Nigerianist colleagues have a legitimate beef. A concentric system of priorities is clearly operative in African art research, publication, and exhibition, with Nigeria at the center, and the Yoruba at the center of the center. As in other fields of human endeavor, energies tend to be directed toward areas where ground has already been broken, where experiences can be shared and compared. The result? Although I have done no systematic survey, I suspect that work done on the arts of southwestern Nigeria -- of the Yoruba and Benin -- is more than the rest of Africa put together.

There are intriguing conceptual parallels to this pattern within Nigeria. I refer to the politico-religious primacy of Ile-Ife -- the city of Ife -- among the present-day Yoruba and many of their neighbors, including Benin. There are many myths of origin -- and variations on each -- among the Yoruba. One version, summarized by Willett (1967:121-2), tells how a god named Oduduwa brought down from heaven a gourd full of earth and a chicken. He emptied the gourd upon the surface of the watery waste which at that time covered the earth. Upon the resultant mound he placed the chicken, which commenced to scratch, distributing the earth to form the dry land. The city of Ife was situated at this original point of contact between the divine and the mundane. Human beings were later created, and Oduduwa became king of Ife. His children were sent out to found their own kingdoms, receiving from him the right to wear the headed crown which is the badge of legitimacy among the Yoruba. Oronmiyon, grandson of Oduduwa, established dynasties at Oyo (which became the political capital of the Yoruba), and at Benin. According to oral traditions, brasscasting technology was transmitted from Ife to Benin somewhat later. And another important diffusion from Ife to Benin, according to William Fagg (1963:41), was the concept of urbanism -- still imperfectly assimilated at Benin after 700 years. I agree with Fagg's assessment of the significance of this phenomenon:

"One of the most important tasks confronting Nigerian archaeology is the determination of the antiquity of Yoruba urbanism, a trait which they have developed to such an extraordinary degree that Ibadan, founded as a military camp less than a century and a half ago, is now, with well over 500,000 inhabitants, the largest Negro town in all Africa; this tendency is rare, and never so marked, among other tribes, far more of whom...go to the opposite extreme of an aversion to the growth of a community beyond village size."

Which brings us to the other part of my title, what I have called "Metropolitan Myopia." It is relatively easy to understand why the English and Europeans should place a high value upon kingdoms and dynasties and other manifestations of hierarchical principles in social and political structures. Such principles are pervasive in their own histories and fundamental to their cultural consciousness. Americans, in contrast, by virtue of their democratic heritage, have traditionally been less comfortable with institutionalized stratification, and, in my judgement, it is less becoming for Americans to be seduced by the pomp and circumstance, the tidiness and spectacular artistic

accomplishments, of kingdoms and empires and other totalitarian states. Of course centralized societies should be studied, but it is incumbent upon the student to recognize that the comparatively high degree of order and stability they tend to exhibit is usually based on repression and en-forced conformity, and that full-time specialization in art or architecture, medicine or warfare, religion or politics, or any other activity, is usually accompanied by the emergence of a network of dependency relationships and by increasing alienation of individuals from each other and from the community to which they belong. Research in centralized societies is usually easier, insofar as essential decisions about access and co-operation are usually made by a single person or a small number of people, and questions about particular subjects can be referred to authorities -- musicians or brasscasters, tax-collectors or priests, including, in non-literate societies, the professional rememberers who are the custodians of the man-dates of privilege and prerogative.

But I wonder if there might not be another factor involved in tendencies for scholars to assign an especially high value to the products of centralized societies. The fact is that such societies -- in or out of Africa, our own included -- tend to be urbanized. Cities, by their nature, are centers of specialization, centers of decision-making in all sectors of life. It is not coincidental that universities and libraries, museums and symphony orchestras are typically urban phenomena. Concentration of political and economic power of the sort that invariably characterizes cities stimulates cultural elaboration. This addiction to the hyperstimulation which cities provide often translates cross-culturally, generating the state of mind which I have called "Metropolitan Myopia". Cities are perceived as the places -- by implication, the only places -- where significant things happen. Cities are the centers, the shrines, the citadels of civilization. If this were not so, we would not have found the recent enforced de-population of the cities of Cambodia by the victorious Khmer Rouge so profoundly disturbing -- a disturbance which I believe was largely independent of the hardships encountered by the uprooted. The Khmer Rouge said that cities are parasites, feeding on the economic and cultural energy of the country-side. While other social planners -- and, as Fagg points out, many African villagers -- have reached substantially the same conclusion, few have employed such drastic measures to attain a more balanced distribution of resources.

In summary: What I have called the Myth of Antiquity translates the Yoruba creation myth outlined earlier, richly poetic and metaphorical, into the dissemination of all culture from Ife, weighing it down with a kind of crude and heavy-handed historiographical credence. The Myth of Antiquity also encompasses, for my purposes, the apotheosis of naturalism as the peak and pinnacle of artistic expression, according to the canons of Classical or Mediterranean Antiquity, and extends to the implicit superiority of works in durable materials -- especially bronze -- which would survive in archaeological contexts over those in wood and other ephemeral media which would not. Metropolitan Myopia imputes special values to the artifacts of what are called "complex societies" -- states, centered in cities -- by virtue of their production by specialists using prestige materials and complex techniques.

I believe that these attitudes and assumptions have had a distorting effect on African art studies, and must confess to a certain incredulity that their implications have still to be confronted sixty years after Duchamp and the Cubists.

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(An earlier version of this paper was presented at a symposium held during May, 1980, at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, in conjunction with the opening of the Treasures of Ancient Nigeria exhibition. I also benefited from the critical comments of my colleague, Cecelia Klein.)



## HIERARCHICAL COMPOSITIONS AS RELIGIOUS METAPHORS IN SOUTHERN NIGERIAN ART

Herbert M. Cole, University of California, Santa Barbara

On certain state occasions the Oha of Benin (Edo) walks slowly in a procession of court dignitaries, his arms supported on either side by attendants, with fan or shield bearers flanking and protecting him. This processional configuration -- a classic hierarchical composition -- recurs frequently in the sculpture of Benin as a frontal group, with motion arrested but often implied; such groups reach back perhaps to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. I would like to explore the variations and layered meanings of this composition in Benin, and then survey analogous ones among other Southern Nigerian peoples: The Urhobo, Isoko, Kalabari Ijaw, and Igbo.

The remarkable consistency of the triangular, symmetrical, multi-unit, heraldic composition across media and object type suggests its great value in Benin thought, not only as a socio-political statement, but as a spiritual, mythic, and psychological metaphor as well. It seems also to have both synchronic and diachronic relevance in the expression of headship and pyramidal organization, and may I think be seen as an archetype in Southern Nigerian thought even among peoples who lack the kind of hierarchical socio-political organization characteristic of the Edo Kingdom.

In Benin the composition recurs in virtually all court arts from brass architectural plaques and ikegoho to reliefs on ivory tusks and sistra. Altars to the Oha's head and others to his ancestors are variants of it, while Olokun shrines both in the capital and in outlying Edo areas are perfect examples in sculptured mud. Virtually always in these figural groups the Oha and his spiritual counterpart, Olokun, are seen by artists as larger than life, doubtless reflecting their centrality and divinity in Edo thought. A related plaque showing the Oba with mudfish legs, swinging two diminutive leopards by their tails, crystallizes the symbol as a metaphor of temporal, mythological, and metaphysical control and authority. Olokun shrines depict this prominent god of creativity, wealth and fertility as Oba-like, as if to reinforce the symbolic identity and complementarity of all earthly kings, living and dead, to Olokun, god of the waters. Their palaces, powers, and attributes are similar; their formal positionings in respective realms, earthly and aquatic, are analogous and their images are mutually supporting visually and ideologically.

To move beyond the limits of Edo-speaking territory is to encounter numerous analogous hierarchical compositions which are interpreted similarly if in distinct local styles. No proof exists, however, for the common origin of these images or for the diffusion of the type; indeed, even the patterns and chronologies of diffusion in Edo territory are unknown. Stimulus diffusion may have caused spread of the composition or it may have evolved spontaneously, as from an archetype. Questions about its origin and spread probably cannot be answered. More to the point are its meanings among Isoko, Urhobo, Ijaw and Igbo peoples, where spiritual dimensions are ascendant over political ones, as is the case of Olokun shrines. This is especially true in Igbo mbari houses in which the central, larger than life-size image is always a deity with no ancestral or overt political associations (both of which do occur in Urhobo and Ijaw renderings).

(There will follow here a brief explication of Urhobo wood sculpture groups called *edjo re akare*, with briefer mention still of *ivri* [Foss]. Then Isoko mud sculpture

will be mentioned [Peek], followed by the duen fobara of the Kalabari Ijaw [Horton; Oelman]. My own data on Igbo mbari will be treated in slightly greater length.)

Mbari hierarchical compositions, and probably Isoko ones, can be accounted for by reference to models of both spiritual politics and the family. Headship, support by and dominance over lesser figures, spouses and children, for example, are explicit in each model, as they are in the more overt political references of Edo, Ilrhubo and Ijaw hierarchical compositions. The central deity in mbari houses is the one for whom the house is made as a sacrifice. All the modeled clay images are considered his/her "children", as are the villagers who constructed the mbari. The local prominence of Earth, Thunder, River, and market-day cults is signalled by the size and grandeur of the various mbari made in their honor; these cults are the major cohesive socio-spiritual forces in their respective communities. Indirect political authority can be wielded by their priests in an area where, traditionally, there existed no real chiefs, no political cohesion beyond a group of villages, each governed by councils of elders. Thus, while mbari hierarchical compositions are parallel to those of Benin in form, the political statements made by each are quite different, for there existed no centralized political power whatever in Igboland to match the pyramidal Benin hierarchy with the divine king at its apex.

In all these compositions the large central figure is made focal by lesser flanking ones, by the balanced formalism of the design, and often by at least implied recessional space. Underlying the composition is the need for and focus of unity on the spiritual leader and immediate members of his or her court. In all cases, too, the "court" can probably be interpreted as the body politic reigned over by the leader, as is explicit among Owerri Igbo. In all cases the composition exists as a conventionalized stereotype, with greater consistency from group to group, however, in Edo, Kalabari, and Owerri Igbo (mbari) examples. I hope this brief survey of hierarchical compositions offers enough evidence to convince people that the various examples discussed are related to one another, however indirectly.

## STYLE CONTINUITIES IN NIGERIAN ART

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After its astonishing beauty and variety, certainly the most dramatic aspect of the "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria" exhibition at the Museum of Science and Industry, Los Angeles, is its demonstration of apparent style continuities across two and a half millennia of Nigerian history. Because these continuities are so striking, they cannot help bring up questions central to the discipline of art history, a function African art has served before in challenging 19th Century academic realism. Down through the centuries, art historians have developed some strongly-held beliefs about the nature of style, although it must be admitted that these contentions are rarely stated and little scrutinized. Since to do so is almost to question the validity of the discipline itself, it may be just as well that the following musings come from a self-confessed humanistic anthropologist with only an M.A. and a split appointment in art history.

Some rarely-stated assumptions of art historians about style which apply to the Nigerian continuities might be:

I. Every style develops over a long period of time from many sources, most of them apparent or traceable, even when it seems to have sprung full-blown into the mind/hand of a great artist.

Even in societies where artists are allowed considerable personal expression and individual fame, in a particular epoch the art of all its artists, great and not-so-great, will be seen after the passage of years to share the epoch's style to a measurable degree, even when they spent their very lives seeking distinctiveness and in making stylistic statements diametrically opposed to the perceived "official" style.

In traditional societies, which includes virtually all of the past and most of the present, individuality exists but is not much encouraged, and as a result, areal and epochal styles are much more homogeneous and slower to change than in contemporary Western society with its quite deviant "tradition of the new."

In these terms then, it is not only possible but likely that the style of Nok has been handed down from master to apprentice, and from ceramicist to carver to metalworker in an unbroken line to modern Yoruba artists. The basic art historical method for testing stylistic continuities is based on frequencies and similarities of detail that early anthropologists termed "the criteria of form and quantity," but which less scholarly souls dub "look alikes." An example of this technique applied on an areal rather than a temporal basis is Olhrechts' masterful categorization of five stylistic regions and 16 substyles throughout Zaire in *Plastiek van Kongo*, and of course Burckhardt's recognition of the cyclical nature of style is based on analysis of the same kinds of data through time. This long-accepted method has recently been challenged, not by an art historian, but as one might expect, by two anthropologists, Richard and Sally Price, in the exhibition catalogue of their show, *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest*, at UCLA last year. In effect, they deny the apparent continuity between West African art and that of the descend-ants of escaped West Africans in northern South America, making a case instead for their creativity and adaptability in a new and hostile environment. They point out that at least a 120 year gap exists between the escape into the interior of the African-born

Maroons about 1720 -- arriving Africans on the coast -- and the creation of the first Suriname art objects just before 1850. Although every previous scholar of the Maroons has remarked on the remarkable conservatism of these people and their determination to preserve their unique heritage, the Prices counter by proposing a "deeper" level of stylistic retention that requires no intermediate objects in the 120 year hiatus during which none have been found to exist. After a devastating shutdown of African and Suriname "lookalikes," they admit that "a large number of fundamental aesthetic ideas were widespread in the region -- ideas about the human body as an aesthetic form, notions about rhythm (in mu-sic, speech, and the visual arts), expectations about dynamism and change in the arts, ideas about the relationship of per-former and audience, the notion of 'multimedia' 'plays,' and so on. Indeed, aesthetics is one of the areas of life for which the hypothesis of a widely shared African set of fundamental assumptions can probably be most persuasively argued" (p. 197). But not, it must be added, by the continuity of objects carrying style characteristics.

A second set of assumptions concerns the relationship between an art style and the society that produces it. Just as few nomads are likely to produce large ceramics nor residents of the Amazon wool textiles and snowshoes, the nature of the culture in its ecological niche determines its technology and equally its art, which brings us to two further widespread art historical assumptions:

4. Because art objects are artifacts of the cultures wherein they are produced, they both influence and reflect those cultures, serving as a kind of distinctive and readily recognizable signature. Even if we postulate an unbroken continuity over 2,500 years between Nok and the contemporary Yoruba, we cannot assume that the artists lived in societies that were technologically or culturally similar to each other, nor necessarily successive in the same ecological niche. Although the stylistic relationships between the Baths of Caracalla and an American 1930's neo-classical bank building are apparent, by means of written history and successive examples we know full well the devious and unlikely route of the Imperial Roman style from its decline and near-extinction through its several revivals to its multiple adaptations down through the centuries. How much more must have happened in the transition from the Jos Plateau to Lagos during all those centuries! Which brings us to the fifth assumption:

5. No style, no matter how weak, conservative, or derivative, inevitably and inescapably tells the truth about the culture that produced it, at least to those (art historians) who have learned how to interpret it.

It follows then that one should be able to reconstruct, up to a point at least, the kind of society which must have existed to produce a given style. If the idealized realism of Ife suggests classical Greece to us, or perhaps better, the work of what Bascom once termed "An unknown Nigerian Donatello," its immediate stylistic descendant, Benin, calls forth comparisons with ancient Egypt, as does much Ashanti art, in their formal and hieratic human apotheoses. And on the bases of such correspondences, who can resist speculating on how these societies might be similar in other ways? Was Ife as humanistically oriented as Athens, as spare and elegant and worldly, as the very fountainhead of civilization with all the religio-political authority entailed? Benin certainly was a strong centralized kingdom which held large numbers of people in its imperial grasp, sent slaving and trading expeditions far away, and deified some of its

rulers. The importance of the symbols of imperial power come through quite clearly in both portraits and wall plaques.

But what can we say in this regard about that most curious and unexpected style in all of African art, Igbo-Hkwu? Its extreme complexity, over-rich surfaces, ostentatiously sophisticated technology used with almost offensive bravado, and repellent iconography featuring that most unloved of God's creatures, the fly (to say nothing of mantises, beetles, and crickets), all suggest the most refined kind of hierarchical court art, and as suggested in the catalogue, domination by priests or priest-kings in service of an elaborate and consciously arcane mythology. How else can one explain objects covered with surface decorations featuring inlaid heads, and forms ranging from the self-conscious elegance of the Roped Pot on a Stand (Plate 16) to the equally self-conscious lumpishness of the Pendant (Plate 32) in the form of a pair of huge eggs surmounted by a small spreadeagled bird and further decorated with long headed strings tipped with hells? In every case, the medium is pushed to its limits and natural objects such as calabash cups are duplicated inappropriately in bronze, two standard measures of decadence. Besides such parallels as Medieval temples and crafts in India and Indonesia and the Churrigueresque in Mexico, Mayan art provides many stylistic parallels, and all four cultures also shared the institution of a dominant priest class. But where do we find echoes of Igbo-Ukwu style in African art today? For all its outstanding variety, recent Igbo art shows none of these characteristics.

One final assumption of art history must be mentioned here, because it underlies all the others and has long been questioned by less self-assured or cosmic-minded scholars:

6. A trained and sensitive person can distinguish the better from the less good in any given body of art without any knowledge of its function or cultural milieu. There are absolute standards and criteria by which all art can be judged throughout all history.

Perhaps after a few more centuries of inspired, judicious, and lucky archaeology, we will be able to decide whether these persuasive Nigerian style continuities are real or illusory after all.

## CONTINUITY OF ICONOGRAPHY IN BENIN ART

Sara Dickerson

While scholars have bemoaned the loss of quality in Benin art being produced in recent times, no one would suggest that artistic activity has ceased in Benin City and its environs to-day. Nor would anyone argue that traditional subject matter in Benin art has gone out of vogue with the artists and crafts-men. That a people's art will evolve as the lives of the people change is obvious, but there is a remarkable continuity of iconography in Benin art that seems to be a testimony to the fact that there is a great consciousness and love on the part of the Edo peoples for their history and royalty. And of course there is still an Oba active in the lives of the people, living in the palace of Benin.

The examples of Benin art in the TREASURES OF ANCIENT NIGERIA exhibit currently touring this country, and now on display in Los Angeles, testify to the mastery of the art and craft of bronzecasting in past times. A traveler to Benin to-day finds that while the high technical skill and refinement of these pieces is not found in current work, there is still a tremendous amount of work being done in both traditional and new media, with highly varying results. Scenes of the Oba and his attendants, so plentiful on the ancient bronze plaques and ivory tusks, are seen in numerous carving workshops and studios around Benin. So also are figures and heads of the Oba, animals considered sacred or powerful by the Edo peoples and numerous other traditional themes in Benin art.

The range of skill and imagination of the carvers in Benin varies widely. Some merely turn out endless copies of the most popular themes for uncritical tourists, while others are highly original modern artists who have studied extensively in Nigeria and beyond, and draw upon both traditional and personalized subjects and iconography in their works.

For most of us, our first introduction to Benin art came from museum collections or books written about the art of Benin away from its place of origin. In her new book, *The Art of Benin*, Paula Ben Amos has done a remarkable job of placing Benin art in the context of its living tradition, while also explaining the ancient examples in the light of the historical situation. Having had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time in Benin during a two year stay in the area during the mid-nineteen sixties, I especially agree with her conclusions about the future prognosis for art in Benin culture:

"Today traditional forms, such as mud shrine figures and ancestral altar furnishings, continue to be made, and new forms are emerging from the traditional base to become an integral part of modern Benin culture." (p.93.)

There are several artistic traditions coexisting in Benin City today. The ancient castes of bronzecasters, carvers, and cloth makers, who have handed down their work and the prestige accorded to that work are still active, as are the artists who began their carving careers while serving as pages in the Oba's palace. Additionally there is a whole range of independent talent working in more modern media.

I feel very fortunate to have been able to discover con-temporary Benin art through the guidance of Ovia Idah, the artist whose work in front of, upon, and inside the palace of the Oba of Benin is admired even by those who are not aware of the identity of the artist. When we first met, he scoffed at my claim of "being a sculptor, too." Only

when I had executed a clay bust of him, did he concede that "a woman could be a sculptor, too..." and he proceeded to map out a two year course for me during which time he took me through many shrines, workshops, studios, altars, and even some of the non-public areas of the palace, with the permission of Oha Akenzua II, to view works by him and numerous other Edo artists. My overall impression was then, and through continuous research still is, that Benin represents an amazingly resilient and deep art tradition which is in no way threatened with extinction.

Idah himself in one lifetime (1908-1968) evolved through an amazing range of Benin artist identities...from page in the palace, carving in his free time like other pages; to being an independent carver in Lagos where he also taught carpentry and carving at King's College for many years; to serving at the request of Akenzua II as a kind of Court Artist in Benin; an artist fulfilling commissions also for the civil government in Benin and teaching at the government carver's studio in Benin City; and finally toward the end of his life, a highly original and individualized artist creating fantastic terracotta and cement sculptures incorporating his own baroque visions of life in Benin into traditional scenes. These were executed both in the form of small wall plaques as well as large rambling sculptures added to his already highly unusual house.

It should be noted also that Idah, being a truly Renaissance man, built at street level in front of his elevated home a gallery for the work of the young modern Edo artists. While he claimed that he was not educated in such a way to fully understand their work, he felt that this was part of the future, and he should support it. Festus Idehen and Felix Eboigbe are two artists whose careers were touched by Idah's concern for the younger artists in Benin.

Daniel Crowley's continuing efforts to put contemporary African art into a truly continental context for us should shed some light on the influence of Benin art which has been made for export over the centuries -- and especially recent times.

He has a way of putting the tourist arts and crafts market as well as the contemporary art scene into a context of both international affairs and Africa's developing elite's turning to art from their own and each other's traditions to decorate their homes and public buildings.

In Black Nucria this is also happening. Quietly around this country, many Blacks are building private collections ranging from tourist arts and crafts items to valuable traditional and contemporary African art.

One of the ongoing attitudes in Benin art that makes for much traditional iconography being retained in current work is the idea that one is free to, actually obligated to be, true to conventions in arrangement of a work as well as detail. While there are obvious style differences between individual artists and even workshops, there is still this necessity to accurately echo tradition. What this can mean today is that at the edges of the art scene, some amazing things occur. A case in point is a recent experience I had here in New Orleans, some several thousand miles from Benin. Mrs. Sybil Morial, first lady of New Orleans, asked me to look at a bronze statue of a woman that she had brought back from her husband's trade mission to Nigeria. I assumed it would be some kind of royal personage from her description. Imagine my surprise when I found it to be a detailed representation, in bronze, of British sculptor John Danford's statue of Bmotan, which stands in front of the C.M.S. Bookstore in Benin City. The only change that the Benin artist had made was to reduce the proportion of Danford's naturalistic figure to a

more African 1:4. To me this represents an interesting dynamic of new material being absorbed into the traditional repertoire.

The living tradition of making art in Benin City and surrounding areas has without a doubt survived into our time and has had an influence on the way we think about world art. It seems that this tradition will prevail far into the future as a reflection of traditions and changes in the lives of the people of Benin. We should be able to marvel on one hand at the high tradition in bronzecasting and carving reached in past centuries in Benin without closing our minds to the current and future artistic life of this dynamic West African culture.



## TREASURES OF ANCIENT NIGERIA

Address delivered by His Excellency Olujimi Jolaoso, Nigerian Ambassador to the United States, on the occasion of the opening of "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria: Legacy of 2000 Years" at the Detroit Institute of Arts, January 14, 1980.

When the government of Nigeria some months ago took the decision to permit the showing here in the United States of

the treasures which will be on exhibition from this evening on, it did so in the belief that the steady improvement that has characterized the overall relations between our two countries would be strengthened and fortified if this cultural dimension was added. In these days when emphasis is almost exclusively placed on economic and political interdependence among nations, we have to remind ourselves always that man is part human and part spirit, and that relations between peoples must reflect this complexity of our nations.

About a month ago, I visited this museum in preparation for this affair, and I had the privilege of talking with quite a few representatives of the media in the course of that visit. After a brief initial reference to the main purpose of my being here, our conversation always switched to the consideration of the price and quantity of petroleum which Nigeria exports to the U.S.! I make reference to this, not to criticize these friendly people, but mainly to underline the dominance which the physical part has come to exercise over the spiritual part of our existence. To us, civilization is the aggregate of the two parts, and that is the main purpose which the tour of these United States by these treasures of ancient Nigeria is meant to serve.

It is true that the relationships based on our political and economic well-being are very important. In this regard we have made tremendous progress in the last few years. This cordiality has been reflected in the increased interest shown by citizens of this country in our own, not only as a source of Petroleum but as a country across the ocean which has a great personality of its own, a country which comprises some 80 million people who are very proud of their heritage and are closely linked by blood and kinship to some 25 million Africans -- I mean, African-Americans -- born in these United States. That is a substantial fraction of your entire population. We must recognize this always in our other relationships, for the black community here is the largest outside Africa, and only Nigeria has a larger one.

This exhibition fills me with many deep emotions. That is not because I happen to have been born into the traditions it represents and am steeped in its significance, but because it permits Nigerians to share with you those "things of value" in our African Heritage. These treasures, which date back to the period before the birth of Christ, at once confirm that we too made our independent and significant contributions to civilization and that we were already doing so before Julius Caesar, in his military campaigns in western Europe, discovered an island whose inhabitants painted themselves in blue woad and hunted rabbits for food with very primitive weapons. I believe that he called that island "Anglia." The treasures further confirm that we even influenced that history and the trend of later European art -- that just as anonymous artists of ancient Greece and

ancient Rome sculpted the figures adorning their palaces and temples, so did our forebears furnish the courts of our kings and the shrines of our gods with some of these masterpieces.

Alas, I wish the similarity could have ended on that felicitous note. But no, for just as the conquering hordes of plundering Roman soldiers desecrated those temples and violated the precious works of art they found when they brought Greece down, throwing darts against the delicately frescoed walls and shooting dice on intricately executed marble table-tops, so were our courts and our shrines violated by at some Times civilizing missions and at others punitive expeditions.

Expatriate historians of the last century did not help matters because their scholarship and research formed the only basis for the evaluation and compilation of African history. They claimed that we had no history until the white man came, and only grudgingly sometimes agreed that there might have been a meaningful past. We must be eternally grateful that the very same technology which has made it possible today for mankind to reconstruct the silent history of the defunct empires of the past in Europe and beyond, and which has only recently uncovered to the world the treasures of Pompeii, covered in those three fateful and dramatic days in A.D. 79, is now being applied to our past and is uncovering our treasures, so that no one will ever again say, "These are a people without an indigenous civilization, a people without a heritage."

I have digressed somewhat in these remarks not just to glorify a past but specifically to emphasize how important we feel about establishing our character and our identity as a people not limited to a manmade time frame in human history. I am happy to commend to you for your viewing enjoyment these priceless pieces, which are testimony to the claim that I have just made. As the international Festival of Black Arts and Culture held in Nigeria in 1977 gave the world an idea of our cultural strength, today Nigeria presents to the United States of America some representatives of her cultural heritage and standing. I hope that they will lead all those who came to view them to question and perhaps reject the Tarzan image and the vulgar concept of Africa and Africans. I hope that many Americans will find in them an additional strand in the bond of humanity which binds us all and transcends national exclusiveness.

It would, of course, be unthinkable for me to omit, in these remarks, the appropriate recognition of, and profound thanks to, all those who have made this exhibition possible. Not too many people know that this tour of the treasures owes its genesis to none other than that great and distinguished friend of Africa and Nigeria within your Federal Legislature. I refer to the Honorable Charles Diggs, whose idea it was in the first place that there was merit in such an undertaking as a potentially beneficial exchange in our bilateral relations. We thank you for your foresight and confidence, Congressman Diggs.

When matters cross national frontiers, they are usually carried by those specially entrusted with foreign relations. Your Department of State has carried that burden admirably, acting on behalf of and with the approval of the Federal Government, working tirelessly to facilitate at all stages the mounting of the exhibition. As a professional myself, I appreciate, more than most people, their efforts and their commitment to the success of the project.

As we indicated from the Embassy when we announced this tour, funding for it has come from grants by the National Endowment for the Arts, Mobil, and the Founders

Society, Detroit Institute of Arts. It is also supported by a Federal Indemnity from the Federal Council on Arts and Humanities. To all these, I extend the sincere gratitude of the Federal Government of Nigeria for providing in the U.S. temporary accommodation and protection for these treasures.

Mr. Cummings and Mr. Kan [Frederick J. Cummings, Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Michael Kan, Curator of African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures, the Detroit Institute of Arts], we are deeply in your debt for the unstinting efforts which you have put into this project, and wish you more success.

"What touches us ourselves shall be last served." To Pr. Ekpo Eye and his Nigerian staff, I extend my congratulations and personal gratitude. This is the first time ever that this prestigious undertaking has been attempted. You have done me proud in your choice of the exhibits and in your dedication and cooperation.

Finally, it is my fervent hope that these treasures will be as well received here and on the rest of their tour in this country as were other foreign ones which have preceded them.

To all of you, I am most grateful.

## IN PRAISE OF OWO

William Fagg

Keeper of Ethnology, British Museum

Three months after spending several days at the opening of this great exhibition, I still find myself ruminating on Nigerian art history in the terms of that excellent arrangement, even though I knew virtually all the pieces very well already. (Indeed, for Benin -- the only Nigerian culture for which Nigeria has a little less than the best collection in the world -- out of sixteen pieces exhibited, I had helped in acquiring ten for Nigeria in my capacity as Keeper of Ethnology at the British Museum.)

The most newly discovered works in the exhibition were the magnificent series selected from Dr. Ekpo Eyo's excavations at Owo in 1969, which I had been privileged to study in Lagos in 1971. These were, for me, a ferment, spreading additional excitement among works of the other great cultures, and leading to an anticipation of major changes in the art history of Nigeria, when (or perhaps if) Owo shall stand forth in the full stature of a great center of art production of the most varied kind, shining with a light equal to that of Ife and Benin, and being perhaps more "African" than either because it owes more to the artistic imagination.

It is by no means a criticism of the exhibition and its catalogue that there was no statement in them of these high-flown assumptions. Dr. Eyo is one of the best of archaeologists and states only what he has uncovered with his hands; his forbearance is itself admirable, especially if it is compared with my impatience. Six years ago, at the Third Triennial Symposium at Harvard, I proposed the thesis that not only the Hunter Style of the Lower Niger Bronze Industry but also the Tsoede bronzes, except for the seated figure, should be credited to Owo, along with various other important pieces, and this was taken up by Professor Douglas Fraser and the Columbia school. Professor Willett mentions these suggestions in his essay, and seems ready to accept them in principle; yet his words are muted, probably from a desire not to make speculative claims but to leave the sculptures to speak for them-selves, as they so eloquently do.

I hope, then, that they will forgive me if I continue my partly speculative observations in praise of Owo. To begin with, we have, as the result of a kind of diaspora of Owo art, the extraordinary situation of a town to which many of the richest of bronze works are credited, but which has within its precincts only a few minor bells and other small works. Surely this situation will be redressed when more excavation can be done and important bronze works discovered. And till then, let careful watch be kept on Owo, for there is no excuse for the scrambling and removal of archaeological materials from their sites; the very important bronze rings studied by Dr. Susan Vogel, which may have come, about six or seven years ago, from a site at Ife, Owo, or possibly Ijebu-Ode, seem to be of this kind, and they may never be properly identified unless further examples can be found in situ.

A good many of the nonstandard bronzes in the (by no means poor) collections of the Benin Museum are very likely to be of Owo origin, especially the three aegides with human figures and the two with ram heads, but also the belt of the legendary giant Enowe and other bronzes associated with it. Elsewhere scattered over the earth are the fine works of the Hunter Style and some other tributaries of the Lower Niger stream. From them and from Owo works in wood and ivory could be put together a richer corpus than those

of Benin and He. But above all let excavations he pressed on with and the tomb-robbery he circumvented.

## PUTTING NIGERIA'S ANCIENT ART IN A WEST AFRICAN PREHISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

Merrick Posnansky

Departments of History and Anthropology, UCLA

The "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria" rightly highlights the spectacular achievement of Nigerian craftsmen in terracotta, copper, brass, bronze and ivory over the past two and a half millennia. What we have to remember, however, is that though West African art reached its apogee in the medieval urban civilization of Ife, Nigerian art is neither the oldest nor the only art from West Africa. In some ways the discovery of the art of Nigeria stimulated the quest for art in other areas of West Africa, but it may also be argued that the sheer quantity and high aesthetic quality of the art has led the outside world to ignore the rich artistic heritage of the rest of West Africa. For many years indeed the beauty and intrinsic value of Nigeria's art treasures even hindered the development of Nigerian archaeology as undue emphasis was placed on discovering new art sites and dating the objects themselves rather than revealing more about the societies which created the objects. It was not until 1969, when Ife terracottas were found in an undisturbed context at Lafogido by Ekpo Eyo, that it was confirmed that they were used quite often as shrine 'furniture'. We still know very little about the domestic households of the people in Benin and nothing about the houses or lifestyles of the people who may have used the Nok figurines on farmland shrines. The art has been described at the expense of other objects which may have told us more about everyday life.

Art in Africa goes back at least 26-27,000 years. These dates, from the Apollo 11 cave in Namibia, are the earliest that we can assign rock art of the Stone Age hunters and gatherers who populated the continent from north Africa to the Cape of Good Hope. Rock art is difficult to date and the artistic tradition could go back another 15,000 years to the beginning of the late Stone Age at which time we have the first evidence for a more sophisticated stone tool kit. It was a technological breakthrough that facilitated the creation of improved implements and undoubtedly made our ancestors more efficient hunters and betokens their greater manual dexterity. Time and skill, together with inspiration, are the main pre-requisites for a successful artistic tradition. The central plateaux and mountains of the Sahara contain the world's most prolific Stone Age galleries where far more sites are known than from the rather better publicized Ice Age art of the Franco-Cantabrian region. The Sahara sequence begins with very large engravings and paintings of large herbivores, elephants, giraffes and antelopes, which roamed a once more humid Sahara. Superimposed on the wild animals there are paintings, often very large, of people with round heads and complex

scenes which hint of a rich mythology of a still rather mysterious people. Huge bovidian frescoes follow and it was probably their creators who, with the growing dessication of the Sahara, headed south for richer pastures bringing with them their skills and presumably mythology and religion. Scattered rock paintings and engravings are found in a few isolated localities in West Africa but are impossible to date as are the occasional rock-gongs which are the first evidence of West Africa's long and rich musical heritage.

The first agriculturalists seem to have been the first West Africans to model figures of animals in clay and fire them to terracotta. In Ghana such figures are associated with the Kintampo industry of around 1500 B.C. They were made by a people who were already fashioning heads of semi-precious stones and living in round mud and wattle houses. Figurines of a greater sophistication are found on the sites of early agricultural peoples in the Lake Chad area and a few from Daima, in the Bornu Region of Nigeria, are on show in this exhibition. Terracotta continued to be one of the media, and one of the few with a chance of surviving till the present, for West African artists in the prehistoric period. The terracotta art of Chad began earlier than 1000 B.C. and has lasted till the present day. Other areas where the terracottas are particularly fine include the inland Niger delta area around Jenne in Mali where human figurines were recently dated to the eleventh or twelfth century A.D. In the forest areas of Ghana and the Ivory Coast many funerary heads, placed in 'cenotaph' graves, approach in size and beauty the terracottas of Nigeria and are dated in the main between A.D. 1600 - 1900. Associated with the heads are miniature regalia items, also in terra-cotta, and a large number of humans, animals and designs, similar to those on stools, gold weights and stamped adinkra cloth, which adorn in relief some of the most highly decorated pots known to the archaeologists in Africa.

It was in the era of metal working that West Africa reached the fullest expression of its artistic ability. Copper working is known from Niger as early as the middle second millennium B.C. There is now increasing evidence to suggest that iron, first found in Niger early in the first millennium B.C. and shortly after in Nigeria, may have had an indigenous development in West Africa as a by-product of copper technology. By A.D. 1000 in Mali and Senegal we find cire-perdue castings of small animals, as from a mound in Mali, and numerous brace-lets and leglets. Though nowhere near as elaborate as the Igbo Ukwu pieces, they do indicate that the skills to make such castings were present over a wide area of West Africa. In addition their distribution tells us that there was from the first millennium a well developed exchange system and complex societies where wealth was accumulated and patronage exercised. With the development of market towns like Begho and states in the area of present Ghana, in the northern fringes of the forest, a vigorous cire-perdue industry developed from probably as early as the fifteenth century which found its most sophisticated expression in the intricate, beautiful and unbelievably numerous brass weights for weighing gold in the Akan world of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Gold objects have recently been found in excavations at Jenne-Deno, the precursor of Jenne, in mid first millennium A.D. contexts. Repousse and other fine work in gold is found associated with mound I tumuli ) burials in Senegal which predate the islamization of that area around A.D. 1300 - 1400. Gold working, which is absent from Nigeria, reached its most sublime achievement in the court of the Asantehenes. Many wonderful pieces are presently being exhibited in the Asante exhibition at the British Museum. Also from Asante, figurative and design reliefs in mud plaster, which still survive on the walls of the occasional fetish houses, give us an idea that not all great West African art was confined to the forms we find in the Nigerian exhibition. The striped textiles of Mali, Ghana and Togo have their origins in the medieval period. The discovery of the dry Tellem caves, in the Bandiagara escarpment of Mali, have led to the recovery of textiles, wood and iron objects dating from the eleventh to the sixth centuries

which gives us a clue to the heritage that has been lost to acidic soils, termites and a punishing humid climate in the rest of West Africa.

Architectural skills are evidenced in the monumental mud masonry of the middle Niger with Jenne's majestic mosque, perhaps the world's largest and most beautiful building, going back in its present form, with the same fabric, to the seventeenth century. Much of West Africa's art like that of Nigeria, was associated with towns, royal patrons, courts and a leisured class having access to ivory, beads, textiles and hardwoods through trade, but "metropolitan myopia", to use a rather telling phrase of Arnold Rubin, should not blind us to the rural arts in painted and incised pottery, functional but decorative iron work and varied forms of textiles for which there is evidence throughout West Africa. In Sierra Leone there are stone figures, the nomoli, which are as yet undated and in Mali the occasional engraving standing stones. In Togo the very first archaeological excavations were conducted in 1981 and most other countries, excluding Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and to a certain extent Ivory Coast, Guinea and Mali, have witnessed only the very occasional small excavation often in areas bigger than most American states and with rich human histories stretching back more than a million years. It is obvious that Archaeology is still in its infancy in West Africa. The next twenty years will undoubtedly yield many new art centers in the same way that Owu and Igho Ilkwo, unanticipated, have joined the triple art 'pantheon' of Nok, Ife and Benin in Nigeria in the last twenty years.

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I am most grateful for this information to Susan Creech McIntosh and Roderick McIntosh of Rice University.

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TREASURES OF ANCIENT NIGERIA: A HISTORIC EXHIBITION Thomas K.  
Seligman  
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

European curiosity about non-western culture began to accelerate during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries when early explorers and sea captains brought back curios of their visits to unknown and exotic places. During this period there developed a scientific interest in some of these objects but it took the vision and needs of a group of artists centered in Paris at the turn of the century to appreciate these objects for their purely formal qualities, and to elevate them from curios to art. It wasn't until two decades later, with Franz Boas' publication of *Primitive Art* (1927), that anthropologists began to view the art objects as something more than pure material culture. Gradually a view began to develop that "primitive art" had a place in the world of art history and that it was a significant visual testimony to the human creativity of all cultures and ages.

Sporadic exhibitions of ethnographic specimens in museums occurred in America beginning in the latter part of the 19th century. The Chicago International Exposition of 1893 and the California Mid-Winter Fair in 1893-94 had a number of pavillions representing the cultures of non-western areas, most notably the South Seas, Southeast Asia and North Africa. The origin of the collections of The M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco in fact derived from the 1894 Mid-Winter Fair and our earliest collections from Africa, Oceania and the American Indians come from this time. In 1923 there was a Southwest Indian Exhibition at The California Palace of the Legion of Honor, but it wasn't until the 1940's that temporary exhibitions in America regularly began to focus on African and other primitive arts as art. Of course natural history museums have for many years shown primitive art in their anthropology halls and only recently they have begun to show these objects as art. There were a few pioneers in this country who believed in the validity of primitive art and argued for its existence in museums traditionally devoted to the "fine arts." In the 1950's the first and only museum devoted to primitive art opened in New York and since that time numerous other art museums and natural history museums have begun to place more emphasis on the area.

Most display pieces in museums and exhibitions are from the last 150 to 200 years, with the exception of a few objects that come from the early period of European exploration. Since most objects on view are of perishable materials, the notion exists in the public's mind that most objects are not old. The scholarly community, through Anthropology and Archaeology departments and more recently Art History and African Studies departments, has made great strides in studying the depths of Africa's artistic, cultural and historical past but the fruits of these endeavors have only been known to a few. Thus I think it is fair to characterize the public's awareness of African art, in so far as this awareness exists at all, by the belief that African objects are mostly made of perishable materials in a crude "primitive" style and are associated with exotic ritual activities produced by tribes living in a back-ward society.

In order to appreciate fully the importance of the exhibition *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* brief mention must be made of the increase in special exhibitions within American museums in the last decade, the huge rise in museum attendance (there are more visitors to museums than to all the football games in any one year), and the evolution of the so-called "blockbuster" exhibitions often coming from foreign museums

and being billed as "Treasures" or "Masterpieces." In the last five years our museums in San Francisco have hosted "Treasures of early Irish Art," "The Splendor of Dresden," "The Treasures of Tutankhamun," and soon to come "The Search for Alexander." Over two million people have visited these exhibitions in San Francisco and it is against this background locally and nationally that the Treasures of Ancient Nigeria must be seen.

Over the last 40 years Nigeria has developed a group of distinguished museums, universities with departments of African Studies, an active Department of Antiquities, and antiquities laws to protect their cultural heritage. From the efforts of these institutions and, as those of you who read the catalogue and labels in the exhibition will see, a fair amount of luck, Nigeria today possesses art objects dating back over 2000 years which form a fairly comprehensive view of the record of human artistic expression in Nigeria. A carefully selected group of the most beautiful and important of these objects comprises the exhibition.

When we were privileged to host this exhibition in San Francisco in the Spring of 1980 it was definitely a success as measured against the other exhibitions of national treasures or of African art. What is most important, I believe, is that this single exhibition has and will continue to do more than any other exhibition of primitive art to turn around the general public's perception of African art. Because the objects are undeniably old, made of durable materials, technically and artistically sophisticated and fairly naturalistic, the visitors to the exhibition are forced to re-examine the notion that African art is crude and "primitive" in the pejorative sense of that word. I have had many visitors comment to me that the objects were "beautiful;" "like Chinese bronzes;" "extraordinary in their simplicity and beauty;" "I never knew African art was anything like this."

Aside from the superb aesthetic and educational experience that awaits the visitors to this exhibition in Los Angeles, the sheer presence of these objects in museums in America endows the visitor with a rich appreciation for the artistry of African peoples and hopefully will help bury the long held western prejudices towards African people and peoples of African descent.