

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 147

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to a programme about friendship about prices and yes ! about Arts and Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The question of whether a work of art should provoke someone to put out a hand in friendship or to hand over a large amount of money - that's a question we're posing later on in the programme but we're starting in Algeria at the International Fair held annually in the capital, Algiers. This year it's included an ambitious cultural programme - in fact, the organisers have set out to make it as much an African cultural event as a straight trade exhibition.

Well, what sort of culture and where did it all come from? We asked Victoria Brittain to take a stroll through the exhibition and send us a report.

VICTORIA BRITTAİN:

Seen here in Algeria the African pavilion is striking in the richness of its displayed art and for the importance art clearly still plays in the life of the society. Old and new sculptures, children's paintings, films, jewellery, hand-woven cotton and basket work are on show from 28 countries and about 50 exhibits from the Musée de l'Homme/Paris show the heights of art and craftsmanship of the past in Africa. The power and individuality of some of these simple wooden statues inspired Picasso and the whole cubi movement among Western European artists earlier this century. It is still inspiring, the modern sculpture shown by the Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Sudan and Nigeria to take just a cross section of the countries exhibiting. The opportunity of looking at the old and new together is rare. None of the Africans I spoke to have seen any of the work from the Msee de Lome before, though some of them would certainly be familiar to many Europeans. None of them felt their country's culture today is based on the animism and belief in magic behind the sorcerer's mask, fertility dolls, carved

head-dresses for ceremonial seed planting from the Paris collection. But this modern art does preserve the same shape and the same symbols, even though the magic meaning may be lost. For instance, the antelope remains the favourite carved animal - massive carved horns top an ancient painted wood mask from Guinea and thin elongated horns soar out of male and female seed planting head-dresses, lashed on to wicker hats from Mali. The modern carvings of antelopes made by Nigerian craftsmen for instance, are less stylised and purely ornamental. But the craftsmen's work is still high quality. Other carved animals such as rhinos shown by the Sudan reminds me of the clear pure lines of eskimo art. Three very different remarkably powerful large sculptures of pregnant women are among the old sculptures lent from Paris. The three from Cameroun, Gabon and the Ubo region of Nigeria, are all distinguished by their expressive and authoritative faces and strong compact bodies. Moderns carvings of women displayed by the Congo are strikingly close to these famous old sculptures. Of course these modern works of art are again purely decorative. In modern society they are not objects for everyday use, like one battered, but beautifully proportioned female sculpture from the Ivory Coast, which has been a drum for ritual dancing before being put to rest in the Museum in Paris. Several exhibitors told me that they wondered, as I did, what is the future of all this flourishing decorative art. Recent political changes have meant the end of the middle class in many African countries. Will the State support artists in new socialist African countries? Mozambique's exhibition was perhaps a pointer for the future. It showed a considerable contrast between oil paintings done for the Portuguese middle class just a couple of years ago, and folios of prints from the art exhibition held recently in Maputo to mark the 1st anniversary of independence. Most of these had a very clear political message, while a collection of delicately carved figures from Northern Mozambique depicts more leisurely days in the countryside and they are being made much less today according to the stand organisers. Another newly socialist country, Benin, showed no changes in its traditional art form. Hand sewn wall coverings and heavily carved furniture are still made by families who all work on each item and have a pattern of life unchanged for 200 years, according to the organiser of their stand. A small steady export trade ensures the continuity of the life style of these families of craftsmen. Films, a less traditional artistic medium for Africa, was represented with just a handful of films, mostly with political scenes, in French and rather poorly attended. One, from Gabon, had a suitable theme for the whole African exhibition. The life of an artist, a carver split between modern life in an African capital city and the traditional culture of his village.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Victoria Britain reporting from Algiers. And the forces that affect today's craftsmen have an even wider effect, an international effect. A story that was recently acted out in London is a familiar one: an auction of works of art from all over the world the continent of Africa which art dealers from all over the world bidded against each other for the possession of a mask or a statue or even a bell. This particular auction took place at the famous Christie's salesrooms, where a great deal of money changed hands. Helen Mayer spoke to the firm's Director of Tribal Art about one item of special interest.

HELEN MAYER:

Now you had some very rare exhibits, didn't you, for instance a bell ?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

Well, in fact the bell wasn't so rare because it's a form we sell several times a year, but what was very odd about this Benin bell is that it had a complete little figure cast on one side of it which you don't find, in fact I've never seen it before and William Fagg, who after all, with his brother Bernard, must be at the top authorities in the world on Nigerian art, they have never seen a little figure like this. So the bell, instead of making the usual price, say of £100/£200 sometimes you can get £400 for a bell that has very finely carved little masks and an intriguing history, well this bell went for £800 which was totally unprecedented - £400 was the most we had hoped for and this is of course part of the Benin paraphernalia that's surrounded the Oba at Benin.

HELEN MAYER:

Do Nigerians ever come to London to purchase these objects?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

Well, sadly we haven't seen them in our salesroom yet here, but I know someone from the Museum came over this year and did go back with some very fine Nigerian things for the Museum in Lagos.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I wonder whether that bell will eventually find its way back to its homeland ? I can't help thinking that it wasn't made to be bought and sold. The debate about the purpose of art is one we've raised often enough in the programme, so here's a further contribution and something quite new to me.

Pierre Kalenzaga, who's from Upper Volta, is in New York at present. And it was in New York that he heard a French ethnologist (that, by the way, is someone who makes a scientific study of cultures and customs), an ethnologist called Professor Eric Erny telling his audience about an interesting and I think you'll agree a charming custom practised by one group of people in Upper Volta. As Pierre explains, they use art to answer the question "How do we relate ?".

PIERRE KALFENZAGA:

How would you feel if someone walked up to you in the street and said to you something like 'Good morning stranger, I would like to be your friend, take ~~some~~ work of art and keep it. May our new friendship last as long as my present to you'. The ethnologist was explaining what he termed 'the friendship customs of the Mossi ethnic group in Upper Volta'. The Mossi, who account for 50% of the population of Upper Volta, are essentially practical people in their social-inter-relationships. For instance, how can one makes friends in a given society. In the modern type of life of the cities, this can be a considerable task for the newcomer or the shy or the introverted person or simply the busy citizen. The Mossi have found a simple and practical answer to this question 'how does one make friends'. "With art of course" they will say "it's rules are easy".

offer a work of art to the person whom you wish to befriend. If the person does not wish your friendship or if one day the person wishes to terminate this friendship, then again the procedure is very simple'. He will come to you with the work of art which you gave him and say something like "This present was too precious to keep, allow me to return it and may you find someone more worthy of it to give it to." On the other hand, if it is you who wants to terminate this friendship, you will go to him and tell him that the artifact was not worthy of him and he will give it back to you, thus putting an end to the same relationship.

The beauty of it all is no questions asked, no tangles, no quarrels. Friendship is made in a ceremonial and it is also ended in a ceremonial with an art object as a seal to it all. Professor Ernys exhibitions shows sculpture and pipes and walking sticks, practical art objects, which were presented to him in Upper Volta by new friendship seekers. At the last count he has over 50 friends in Upper Volta judging from the number of exhibits.

One very important observation which the Professor made though, was that, for the newly sealed friendship to be durable, the art artifacts should also be durable, because if you make friends with a Mossi and present him with something that will not last, well the day your present is destroyed by an accident or simply through the process of aging in time, then your friendship too is considered as ended the very same day. "It is this very important fact that explorer Mungo Park, of Britain, failed to notice" the Professor said, which he added, "cost Britain a colony". In effect, he said the Scottish explorer Mungo Park, while in West Africa in the last century, met with the Moro Naba, Emperor of the Mossi, who was then surveying the embankments of the River Niger with his whole army. Mungo Park, after a brief moment of hesitation, crosses the river to salute the Emperor. 'I come with a message of friendship from the Sovereign and the people of my country" he says to the Emperor through an interpreter. The Emperor nods and so does his Prime Minister, who like him, was on horseback. Then Mungo Park looks feverishly in a small bag which he always carries with him, and takes out a piece of material which the Emperor will describe later as "one of the most beautiful pieces of art I have ever seen, made of straight lines and in colours so vivid. "This beautiful piece of art is the British flag", the Union Jack. Mungo Park offers it to the Emperor with the words "If your majesty will accept this present, the flag of my country, as the sign of the friendship between our two peoples". The Emperor is delighted, of course and so is Mungo Park who thinks that in West Africa, where the French are making ground so easily at the time, he had just won the support of the Mossi for the British. In fact, that was the case. Alas, not for long. The Moro Naba went back home to Wagaduga with the flag and gave it to his Prime Minister to keep in the treasury of the Empire. However, after a few years and a few rainy seasons the flag, which was paraded from time to time with the crown jewels at ceremonies, got old and practically disintegrated through the effect of the weather. No British flag, no friendship with Britain "said the Emperor, who was soon to be visited by the French. By a stroke of luck, the latter complied with the friendship rules of the Mossi. They offered the Emperor a sculptured pipe and a cane which he kept a long, long time. Those presents were not eroded by time and, as a result, through the Mossi, Upper Volta became French.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

A very interesting tale from Pierre Kalenzaga.

and I'm hoping that the idea of 'art for the sake of friendship' has survived the colonial experience. Their music certainly has. Here's a traditional Mossi Orchestra to end today's programme - but for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

Music of the Mossi of Upper Volta.

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