

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. You may remember hearing in this programme last year about an exhibition of treasures from ancient Nigeria on tour in America. The hundred works of art lent by the Nigerian Government has enthralled the American public over the last year, and has sparked off great interest in Africa's artistic heritage. Well now that the Nigerian treasures are about to be packed up, and sent back to their owners, another major show of African antiquities is continuing to delight the American public. It's an exhibition of fifty-nine terra cotta sculptures from the ancient West African civilizations of Mali and Akan peoples of Ghana. They are being shown at the African/American Institute in New York, and are shortly to be transferred for another showing in Chicago. The person in charge of exhibitions at the African/American Institute is Marie Therese Brincard and she explains why she chose this particular show.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

When I came to look at African art, I was lucky enough to have been exposed to African terra cottas primarily in Belgium. Afterwards, of course, there was the superb exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Nigerian treasures among which, of course, the Nok and Ife terra cottas were quite spectacular. Afterwards it came to my mind that it would be a good idea to expose the public to other areas of Africa where terra cotta was an extremely important medium in respect of their art and Mali and Ghana were the two countries where terra cotta is extremely important. That, of course, does not underestimate the wooden sculpture. But what is interesting in terra cotta is that one can go far beyond the ages demonstrated by wooden sculpture and therefore come into contact with the first aspects of civilization. That's how I had the idea of doing this show on terra cotta.

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Terra cotta itself is clay baked to become hard and compact. After firing it ranges in colour from grey through buff to a beautiful rich brown or red. It's a medium which has been used in many parts of the world since the early Neolithic times. The New York exhibition includes twenty-one heads - originally part of complete figures - and six full statuettes from Mali. Then there is a group of thirty-two funerary sculptures of the Akan peoples of Ghana. All come from private collections in Europe and America. Much the oldest

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

of these terra cottas are those from Mali. They date from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. Marie Therese Brincard is particularly interested in these early Mali heads, and the mystery that surrounds them.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

I think that when one looks at those heads, one has a fascination about this ancient culture which still remains to this time quite a mystery and it's this mystery that we're trying to explore through those heads. Those twenty-one heads on display in the exhibition were part of full figures. What we're seeing here, therefore, is only fragments, and what one notices right away is the stylistic variety from this very incredible multiple eyelid style with very prominent geometric forms. Then we have an example where this couple, male or female, one is not quite sure because they are covered by their dress, are embracing each other and still here you have the stylistic multiple eyelid which is appearing with those prominent geometric features. Then there is another style which is extremely realistic where you see all the details of the features and with the snake on top of the forehead which again has many connotations, of course, with Egypt or The Sudan, the ancient civilizations of Nubia. Then we go on and we see very important and monumental heads which were certainly part of a structure which are extremely bold in the rendering of their features. Then we see total abstraction in the treatment of some of them. Here in this area of the inland delta of the Niger, which is very specific in terms of the area that it is covering, we have at least fifteen to twenty styles which flourished. We can see influences in some, in others we cannot and we just detect here the richness and the wealth of this artistic centre about which we know extremely little. We know that the Arab authors, in the ninth century, talked about the civilization of Mali and we have records about it. We have three empires which succeeded to each other, the empire of Mali being the last. What else do we know? What was the function of those heads of full figures? We know one thing that there is a myth of origin for the ancient empire of Mali where there was the claim to descend from the ancient empire of Ghana or Ouagadou and where there was a serpent called Ouagadou who is at the origin of the beginning of this civilization. One of the customs was to kill, each year, a virgin in honour of Ouagadou and, of course, as is typical of this type of story, our chief fell in love with the virgin who was to be killed and, therefore, he decided to kill the serpent and abolish the custom. But what happened was the following year a drought came over the country, and probably to remedy and appease the gods, a sacrifice each year to remember this was achieved. Now were those heads made for that sacrifice? Were they used in funerary rites or other rituals? It is still too early to say. We have no answer to the question. We have the material but there is still a lot to be deciphered.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - FESTIVAL MUSIC OF THE MALINKE PEOPLE OF MALI.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was some festival music of the Malinke people of Mali. Unlike the terra cottas from Mali, the art of the Akan in Ghana shown in this exhibition is better known. Indeed the tradition of terra cotta art is very much alive today in Ghana whereas in Mali it has long since disappeared. The terra cotta funerary heads on display in this exhibition are spectacular examples of the refinement and stylistic variety attained by the Akan sculptors from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards. Marie Therese Brincard told us what she knew about them.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

As a contrast, in a way, with Mali we do know the function of these heads which were funerary heads of the deceased ruler as was always the prerogative of royalty. Another very important aspect in the making of those terra cottas, as George Preston underlines in his catalogue is that they were made solely by women. He thinks that probably the queen mothers would commission specific women to make these heads and they would live in the court and, therefore, form a group and their apprenticeship would then be held. However we will see in those heads again the variety in terms of the expressions growing from highly abstract to the great delicacy in the rendering of the features which sometimes gives a comparison of classicism in Greek art which I think is quite stupefying. We have a group of four which is certainly quite unique. One which is an Akan head which has this extraordinary, elaborate coiffe which crowns her and her features, (I say her, but I don't know whether it's a her or a he) ...

GILL GARB

(Laughs) She does look like a her.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

... with this marvellous rendering of the eyes, the nose, the mouth as clarification of the face, the elongated neck with the rings around it.

GILL GARB

It's incredibly delicate.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

Incredibly delicate. And the presence in this head is just absolutely extraordinary. That it is royal there doesn't seem to be any doubt even if she is not necessarily the representation of the queen.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The most unusual Akan terra cotta in the exhibition is a full figure seated on a three tiered stool. This was a surprise find and has rather a curious history.

MARIE THERESE BRINCARD

This figure is certainly a very particular one. First of all because of the distance it has come from, it's come from Hawaii and it's shown for the first time, not only in the United States but is discovered by scholars and the general public for the first time. In fact, I came upon it just by luck. I was going one day and talking to an assistant of a dealer and saying: "I'm putting together a show on terra cotta for Mali and Ghana. Do you have anything in terra cotta from either of those countries?" "Oh," he said "yes, I'll show you a photograph". I realised right away from looking at the photograph that it was something quite remarkable but I said: "I guess the piece is in New York". And he said: "No, not at all. The piece is in Hawaii where I come from". But this piece is certainly quite exceptional as George Preston points out in his catalogue. To his knowledge there is only one other piece like it which is in Ghana. This one represents either a seated queen mother or a priestess because of the ears that are pierced. Now she is covered with kaolin which is this white paint which is, in fact, the way in which the Akan people, in ceremonies, do cover themselves with. She is sitting on, which is rather rare, a triple kind of throne and supported by a bird and she is holding on one hand presumably a kind of broom which was the fan that the queen mother or the priestess used to balance during the procession. This piece, if you look at it only from an aesthetic point of view, you can see the boldness of the renderings which are rather old and crude, so to speak and yet the figure, the face, the features which are rendered in this very amazing way with very delicate slanted eyes, is clarification to embellish, of course, the face. It's therefore certainly in contrast with the rest of the body which is bold and even rather coarse in its rendering.

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Marie Therese Brincard talking about the splendid terra cotta heritage of the ancient civilizations of Mali and the Akan peoples of Ghana. And we hope that the people of West Africa will also have the chance to see them in the near future. That's all we have time for now so until next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - LIMPOPO.