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NARRATOR -

COSMO PIETERSE:

Hello - this week one of the world's best known experts on African art talks about his latest book, and discusses some of the problems and issues facing the art historian in Africa. Professor Frank Willet is now Head of the Department of African Art at Northwestern University in the United States, but, of course, has spent some years in Nigeria working at Ife - his principal study area. Well this month Professor Willet's latest book "African Art" will be on sale in Africa - and as he's currently on a year's study leave in Britain, we asked him into the "University Report" studios to talk about his book, and some of the issues raised by it. Now, I don't know about you, but whenever I hear about a book that claims to be about 'African' anything I am very sceptical about its value. As a rule they skim the surface of the subject inadequately, and often inaccurately, and they only serve to keep alive the European myth that Africa is one homogenous area which can be dealt with as a single topic.

Producer, Gwyneth Henderson, has been reading the book - and talking to Professor Willet so I'll pass no more judgements yet and hand over to her. Gwyneth.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well, Cosmo, of course my initial reaction to the book was the same as yours - but after reading it - well I had my mind changed for me! In fact it is not about the whole of Africa at all - it concentrates very heavily on Nigeria, to a lesser extent on West Africa generally, and with bits on other parts of the continent. So when I talked to Professor Willet, I asked him first why, in spite of Nigeria being his area, did he concentrate on one country and still call the book "African Art".

PROFESSOR WILLET: Well the main reason is that the great majority of books on African art write about Africa as an undifferentiated whole. The African does this, African art is that - and this of course is a lot of nonsense, and so what I've tried to do is to take case studies, and given examples of specific studies that I knew of from the literature, or which I have been involved in myself. And as a result of this, as you said, I've spent quite a long time in Nigeria, I know Nigeria best and I wanted to write about the things that I really knew about, to establish principles which will be of interest to students who could then get a better understanding of African art by appreciating, what I think at least, are the things that matter about it. And what I really think matters is what it meant to the people that produced it, why it was produced and what it meant to them.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Consequently, the book is easy to read, and has some real information in it. Chapter One is a general introduction to the different types of art found in Africa, and the relations between it and the living conditions of the people who created it.

Chapter Two is a small survey of what other people have written about the art of Africa - and Professor Willet appears to have no high opinion of many of his fellow authors!

But it is in the third chapter that the book really takes off, where I found myself reading it with real pleasure, and it's effect was also to make me want to know more. For instance, the earliest extant form of African art is, of course, the prehistoric rock paintings, found mainly in the Sahara, and Kalahari Deserts, but yet when one thinks of African art it is not paintings which come to mind but sculpture. Painting appears to have mostly died out in favour of sculpture, wood carvings, metal work and so on. I asked Professor Willet why this had happened.

PROFESSOR WILLET: It seems to have died out along with the change in the basis of the society. Peoples who are still hunters and pastoralists do, in fact, still continue to paint

PROFESSOR WILLET
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on a much reduced scale. They don't lead quite the life they lived. The bushmen, for example, have been pushed very much into the Kalahari Desert and are very much eking out a very marginal existence now, whereas in former times when they were doing the paintings they would probably have had a reasonable living.

In addition, of course, when people settle down, they have much more opportunity for doing other things, and if they continue to paint, they usually paint the walls of their buildings, and since African buildings are mostly of mud, they collapse eventually and the paintings disappear with them. There is quite a lot of wall painting done in Africa that's never been adequately studied, though a number of studies have been done.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Of course, everyone is aware of how much research does still need to be done - how much still remains to be discovered. Professor Willet illustrates in his book the sort of tantalising partial evidence they have, and the temptation there is for archaeologists, and art historians, to make direct links where none may exist. For example, terracotta sculpture from the Nok culture which flourished from the 4th century BC to about the 2nd century AD has been discovered, and then very similar sculpture still exists amongst three peoples in or near the same area. But is it likely that the evidence will be found to make it possible to decide whether or not terracotta sculpture is a continuing tradition in this area?

PROFESSOR WILLET: I think so. I agree that it's a terrible temptation to say because it's in the same area, it must be a survival. But recently, one of my colleagues, Anthony Pridie has been digging near Yelwa, near the dam site, the Kainji Dam and has discovered five or six different types of terracotta sculpture in his excavations which are dated from about 100 AD to about 700 AD by a whole series of radio carbon dates and this is part of this extension in time from the Nok culture onwards. This area is to the north east of the Nok area. Ife, where I did most of my work of course is to the south east of the Nok area, so there's no question of this being a link between the two.

PROFESSOR WILLET: We've got Ife dates now running from the 6th century AD, they begin to cluster around 800 AD and then continuing upwards.
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Only three years ago there was a whole thousand year gap in the whole of pre-history in Nigeria, between the end of the Nok culture, the latest radio carbon date there is about 200 AD and we had no radio carbon dates at all for Ife at that stage. Actually, we did in fact have one of about 1630 AD. So we are rapidly filling in these gaps in time and I think we shall ultimately fill them in in space as well.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: So, in fact, the materials are still there to be discovered and it's just really a question of not enough people have been there yet, not enough money has been put into it and this is what is needed.

PROFESSOR WILLET: Yes, and I think also one important factor is that so much depends on the local farmers. There have never been many archaeologists in Nigeria, never more than half a dozen at any one time, but there are millions of people turning over the soil continuously - they are really finding the archaeological material and if they know what they are finding, as they do in the areas around Ife and around Joss on the plateau in the Nok area, then they will report it to the museum, but in the areas that are not served by museums, there is a very big propaganda job that does need to be done to encourage people to report their finds.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well the Nok culture is indeed very old - earliest datings are several centuries BC, but we've all been taught that the wealth of ancient Egyptian art and culture formed the basis of so much of the West's culture, never mind Africa's. But in his book Professor Willet devotes only a small sub-chapter to it, and yet Egypt is an African country.

PROFESSOR WILLET: There are large areas of Africa that I have ignored, Ethiopia is another one. But the point is that the reason I put in a chapter on Egypt particularly was that there is a large literature about this country written by people who were primarily interested in the

Middle East, and the history of the Middle East, and its role in the development of European civilisation. And the role of Egypt in the study of African art has been to follow this example, that because Egypt had it first, therefore the similar phenomenon occurring in Africa must have come from Egypt.

Now we don't have a chronology for a great part of Africa and if we look at Egyptian art in particular, if we look at the earliest Egyptian art, the dynastic Egyptian art - it's very African in character and even later many of the figures that are placed in tombs are socially the equivalent of African ancestor figures - they are the dwelling place for the spirit of the deceased. So that if we look at Egypt as being a local manifestation of African culture, then I think we can see it in a better perspective. It is a manifestation which is very well documented over a long period, of a basically African culture sharing many characteristics with Africa south of the Sahara, which gradually becomes influenced from the Middle East and changes in character but unless we have well documented evidence that something really did come from Egypt, when we don't have any chronology in the rest of Africa, the flow could equally have been the other way, and in many cases I think all we have in Egypt is a local manifestation of a highly specialised kind of phenomena that are found all over Africa.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well Professor Willet's "African Art" apart from having an easily readable, interesting text is also very well illustrated with over 250 plates - and unlike most illustrated books it was a real relief to find the vast majority of the photographs were actually on the same page as the text describing them! A happening all too rare in my experience! Anyway on going through just looking at the pictures, I am reminded again of something one hears often when African art is discussed - that all African art is utilitarian. It's created either for religious purposes, for ornamentation, to ward off evil spirits or whatever and that creative art, as it is understood in Europe and America, doesn't

exist in Africa. Professor Willet had also heard this point of view before.

PROFESSOR WILLET: Well, I think in the West we tend to make an invalid distinction between art for its own sake and art for the sake of society. I think all art has a social purpose. It may be that a 20th century European artist denies that it has a social purpose but he would be only too glad to sell it, if he could find a buyer who would stick it on his wall and use it as an ornament or a status symbol. So I think the distinction is really rather artificial.

In so far as the present day artist says he is trying to express his innermost feelings about something - no doubt he is quite sincere in this but I don't think that this necessarily excludes an African artist. Indeed, we can document this - that African artists working within a traditional style, certainly do pass comments on the world around. There was a carver living in Lagos until quite lately called Thomas Ona whose carvings were always thought to be caricatures and this was thought to be a comment on the world around him. In fact, he said this was how he really saw the world. He wasn't trying to be sardonic at the expense of the Europeans - he carved Yoruba Obas in the same way. It was his individual sight of life - his view of the world around him that was being misinterpreted by Europeans. But African art, I think is best compared with European medieval art, because African societies, traditional societies that we are primarily concerned with when we talk about this traditional African sculpture, are agriculturally based societies, peasant societies if you like, and so the closest social background that's comparable in European history is medieval art, medieval society and the art that it produced and the great majority of mediaeval art was either for the glory of the church, sculptures of saints and so on, or else it was for the greater glory of the lord of the manor, paintings of his ancestors that would decorate his hall and it seems to be that these are exactly the same as one finds in Africa.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Another western myth put in perspective. And talking about perspectives, Professor Willet has also included a chapter on an art form in Africa, that has never been in perspective - architecture! African architecture has been so neglected it is good to see it included in an introductory book like this. Hopefully in the future it will take its full place. And what of the future for all art in Africa? It is often said to have a very depressing future - one hears on all sides that African art is dying out, in fact, that it has no future. Is this true?

PROFESSOR WILLET: I think this comes from the sort of museum mentality that would like to preserve the whole of Africa unchanged. African art always has been changing of course, if it hadn't been changing we wouldn't have found it possible to write anything at all about African art history, or for that matter about the history of Africa.

What's going on now is that traditional African art is losing its traditional supports. There are fewer and fewer commissions, so that fewer and fewer traditional artists are able to make a living, but on the other hand we have other developments. We have, of course, artists who are being trained in western-type schools, who are producing western-type art and some of them are beginning to find African patrons, though most of them are not at the moment. But we also have these quite recent developments of workshops, summer schools set up to bring people in off the streets - give them materials and let them express themselves with no formal training. And these people have been staying in their own communities, developing themselves in quite new ways, using western materials in entirely individual ways which have no real western influence upon them, and as a result, since they've stayed in their communities, they have been able to find a local patronage and this, I think, is one of the most exciting things that have been happening in African art for these last few decades. As I see it at the moment, this seems to me to be the way in which African art is most likely to find itself,

PROFESSOR WILLET
(CONT.'D.)

because many African artists are having a sort of crisis of identity, having had western training and been accustomed to a sort of western patronage, they're having great difficulty in finding an African patronage.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: And it's with these cheerful and thoughtful ideas on the future that Professor Willet ends his book. And by now you must have realised that I enjoyed "African Art" very much. As an introduction to the subject I think it would be invaluable to students and anyone just interested in art and will fill a long-felt gap. "African Art" by Frank Willet is published by Thames & Hudson in paperback edition at 25/- and in hardback at 42/- in the United Kingdom and it should now be in the bookshops in Africa. And yes, Cosmo, you may borrow my copy!

COSMO PIETERSE: Thanks Gwyneth, only to browse through - I'm going to save up and buy my own when I can afford it! There we must leave it for another week and so from Gwyneth and myself, Cosmo Pieterse, it's goodbye for now.

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