

## AFRICAN IVORIES

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It is now over fifty years since African art emerged from its dusty obscurity in the ethnological corners of museums to become one of the dominant influences in the development of modern European art—truly dominant, in that its vitality inspired Picasso to his Negro Period and the creation of '*Les Femmes d'Alger*,' one of the most influential paintings of the 20th century. Although it is true that Cézanne was the precursor of Cubism, there is no doubt that the step from Cézanne to Cubism was made possible only because of the simplification and freedom which artists such as Picasso recognised in African art. Further, not only was the vitality of African art felt in Paris, but in Berlin and Munich too. It is not always appreciated to what extent the influence of African and other styles of 'primitive' art was formative in Expressionism.

Since 1910, African art has been fairly extensively written about—and has acquired a considerable following among wealthy collectors. Unfortunately, these writings consider African art only in its totality—ignoring, of course, the contributions of anthropological scholars, whose approach is essentially ethnological.

It is clearly time that African art should be considered and evaluated on the same basis as European. Further, it is time that Africans became more involved in the analysis and assessment of their own art forms. In a recent and comprehensive work on African art, there are only two references to African authorship in a bibliography of 122 items. It is undoubtedly true that social and economic needs must take first place in the newly created African States; but it should be appreciated that advances in these fields will yield only a sterile materialism if the indigenous cultures are allowed to die and be replaced by imitations of European prototypes. This is now all too apparent in some of the appalling creations which go under the name of 'tourist' carvings, as well as in the palpable imitations—unsuitably aged—which can now be found in some art galleries. It must not be said of the new Africa, with its deep-rooted tradition in art, as it is now being said of the West—as Professor Stuart Hampshire phrased it in a recent radio talk—"We are in a state of confusion

about the place of the arts in our lives and in the life of society as a whole."

To be specific, there is a crying need for a comprehensive work on the ivory carvings of Africa. It is all too frequently assumed that wood was—and is—the principal material of the African carver, and ivory the traditional medium of the Far East. To underline this general attitude, it is only necessary to refer to the section on 'Ivory Carving' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. No mention whatsoever is made of African work. Yet, surprisingly, considerable space is given to Eskimo work, which, for all its appeal, is very limited when compared with African ivory carving.

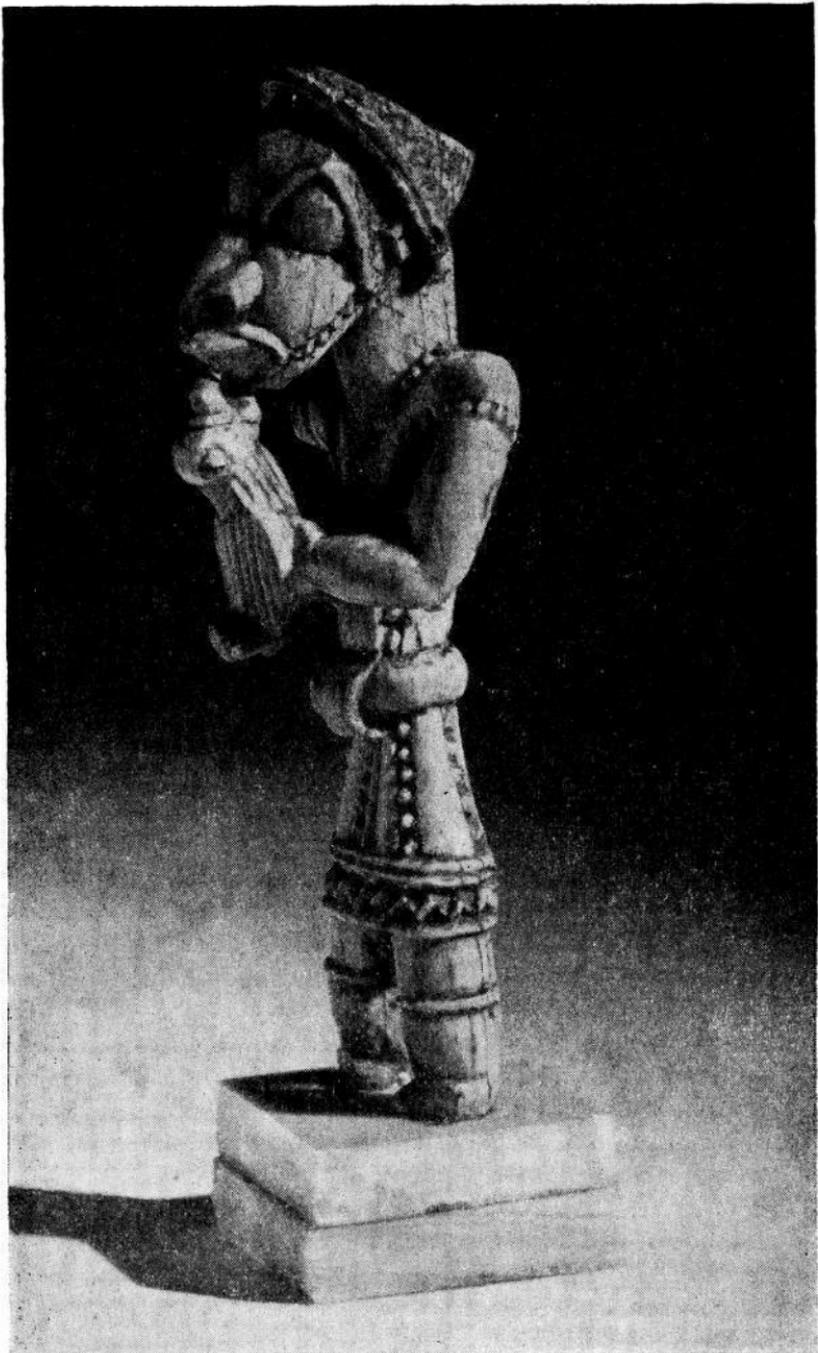
What is fascinating about African ivories is their broad sculptural variety; and when one realises the difficult problems of technique which the material imposes on the carver, this achievement is all the more impressive.

I have recently compared a Benin ivory amulet with a Romanesque ivory diptych, and find that the Benin work well survives the comparison. The low relief design of the amulet is perfectly balanced within the cylindrical area, and the subjects of the design are beautifully and delicately carved; in fact, the figurations have a surprisingly large number of points in common. I also compared the amulet with a low relief Chinese ivory brush holder and found that it stood up to the challenge just as well as it did to the Romanesque diptych.

One of the most vital styles of African ivories is that of the small Warega figure carvings of the Congo. These are bold and direct, and have a sculptural force which, for me at least, has the same impact as a Henry Moore maquette. In fact, the Warega ivory figurines exemplify for me all that is truly 'primitive' in African art. So much so, that I always—and often unconsciously—call them to mind when viewing the excursions of contemporary sculptors into the primitive. I have in mind especially a little 'fetish' figure by Reg Butler which, for all its charm, remains a conscious striving after 'primitiveness' and inevitably a product of a sophisticated European mind.

To prove to myself that I am not overestimating the level and significance of African tribal ivories, I have carefully studied the Benin ivory amulet masks and the magnificent Balega ivory mask in the collection of the late Sir Jacob Epstein.

The Benin amulet masks I believe to be amongst the finest examples of ivory carving in the world. They are African



*Afro-Portuguese Ivory (16th Cent.)*  
Collection Herbert F. Rieser. Height 2 ins.

works, yet they have a powerful feeling of sculptural portraiture which I can only liken to heads done by such European sculptors as Donatello and Rodin. Though there is no doubt that Portuguese influences made themselves felt on the early carvers, the pieces remain emphatically African for all that.

The Balega mask is not just a fine piece of African carving. It illustrates very forcibly that quality of simplification and freedom which Picasso realized was necessary in order to step from Cézanne's ideas to Cubism; in fact, its feeling is strongly present in Picasso's *'Nude with a Towel'* (1907)—and the step to *'Bust of a Woman'* (1909), an early cubist painting, is very short. Another point about this mask, a purely personal one, is the influence it had on Epstein when he produced his head of William Blake. In many Epstein carvings, the African prototype is not hard to detect, but with the Blake, the influence is much more subtle and complete. It would be impossible to make a one-to-one correspondence of the Blake with the Balega mask, but the underlying common feeling and power are only too apparent.

The four examples above are drawn from what one might call the higher levels of African ivory carvings. The reason for this is simply that they are better known to the non-specialist, so that my comments are more likely to be meaningful. There is, however, a mass of ivory carving the quality of which is just as high as that of the works I have mentioned above, but which is little known and, except by a few collectors, is virtually ignored. I refer particularly to the functional objects—spoons, ladles, combs, bracelets and the like. Although such objects are essentially utilitarian, many made of ivory are adorned with figurative carving of the very highest quality. Such carvings are cogent examples of the inherent aesthetic sensibility of the African—a factor, I feel, which is common to all branches of the human family, but which tends to be suppressed in essentially materialistic civilizations. Compare a comb bought at a modern Western department store with, say, a Baluba ivory comb, and the true measure of what I mean will be quickly evident. This brings me back to what I said above regarding Africa and its indigenous arts.

One could go on endlessly, dealing with such pieces as the Baluba ivory amulets, Bapende ivory masks, or the exquisite Afro-Portuguese ivories which, until the recent publication of a book on these objects, were an almost unknown art form to the general reader.

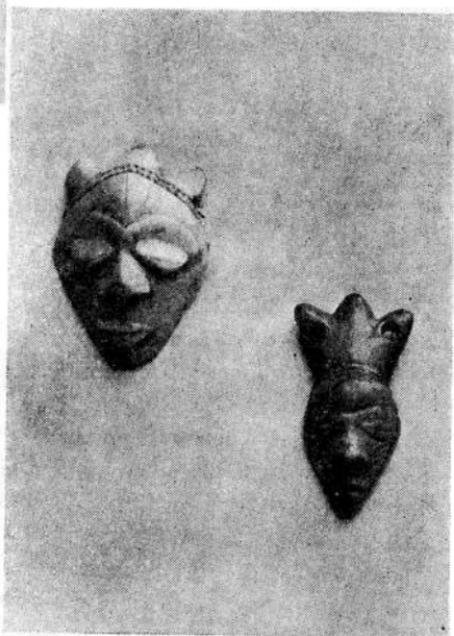
If the new African States can appreciate their heritage, they may well be able to avoid making the mistakes which the West has made in creating hideous functional articles. The only excuse for the West is that it had no precedent. Africa has!



*Warega Ivory Mask*

Height 6 ins.

*With acknowledgements to the British Museum.*



*Bapende Ivory Masks*

Height 2 ins. each

*With acknowledgements to the British Museum.*