

African colleges. This would give admirable opportunities for the initiation of American students into African life.'

All these matters are keenly interesting to members of this Institute. We hope that Fisk will keep us informed about the progress of the scheme. M. M. GREEN

### *Australian Institute of Sociology*

THE Institute has received from the Australian Institute of Sociology an interesting publication called *Social Horizons* and dated July 1943. It is a collection of articles on sociological subjects which will, if circumstances allow, be followed by further volumes. The articles are particularly concerned with the application of sociology to the present and future problems of Australia. There is also an obituary notice on Professor Malinowski paying tribute to his great gifts both as social anthropologist and as teacher.

### *Primitive Art Exhibition, Melbourne, 1943*

THE exhibition of primitive art held at the National Gallery of Victoria includes works of plastic and graphic art from New Guinea, Melanesia, Polynesia, America, and Africa. The catalogue gives descriptions and reproductions of Bushman paintings, masks and statuettes, carved wood bowls, and other objects from the Belgian Congo, examples of Nupe brasswork and embroidery, brass statuettes from the Cameroons, and modern Bantu wood-carving from South Africa. In his introduction Mr. Leonhard Adam, Melbourne University Research Scholar in Anthropology, refers to the growing interest in primitive art, and its bearing on psychological and ethnological studies. 'The scientific study of primitive arts, art techniques and styles, the investigation of their historical developments and their religious and social functions is an important sub-division of ethnology.' Primitive art, though it has often evolved into more stylized or naturalistic forms, is distinguished by the qualities of spontaneity and sincerity. Mr. Adam refers to the effect on indigenous art of cultural influences from outside and of the introduction of European goods, particularly tools, which has been responsible for the deterioration, in technique and quality, of many primitive arts. With reference to African Negro sculpture, Mr. Adam thinks it unlikely that even the oldest Negro sculptures of wood, at present in European and American museums, can be older than a few centuries, but they were undoubtedly made with original African iron tools.

### *Comments on F.M.O.'s article, 'Contribution to the Study of the Chronology of African Plastic Art.' Africa, vol. xiv, no. 4, October, 1943.*

I do not agree with the following statements in F.M.O.'s very interesting article. On p. 185 the author writes 'These data about Benin are of direct importance for the chronology of Central African art, for,' as he contends, 'the expansion of the art of Benin extended to the south-east, and very probably reached the Congo basin. Some even think that during one period of its history the political hegemony of Benin extended as far to the south as Angola.'

I do not know how this legend arose which made Benin into a huge empire, other authors even alleging that it reached as far north as the Gambia. Benin was always a small kingdom in size, and, for the greater part of its history, part of the Yoruba kingdom. The court historians at Benin still know in detail, from the twelfth century onwards, what countries or tribes were conquered by their kings, and these were only in the immediate neighbourhood of Benin; that is to say, at the height of its power the Benin kingdom only covered the southern part of what is now called Southern Nigeria. In addition, the Bini have never

been a sea-faring nation and have never claimed to have been one. Their primitive canoes were used solely for purposes of fishing and transport, in peace and war, on the endless rivers, creeks and lagoons which are the dominant geographical feature of their country.

On page 189 the author says that 'in certain areas of the west coast of Africa, plastic art has a tendency to make use of polychromy as soon as it loses its firmness of style, and as soon as it becomes decadent'. And again, 'the artist resorts to polychromy so as to hide under a daub of paint the poverty of his means of expression', and he refers to Yoruba and Dahomey (as well as Kabinda and Lower Congo<sup>1</sup>) as the chief sinners. In this connexion, there are a number of points which should be considered. Firstly, the polychrome figures of the Yoruba are those which stand or stood in palaces and temples supporting a low and overhanging roof. The highly elaborate carved figures, sometimes placed one on top of the other, were difficult to see in the subdued light, and were therefore picked out in colour; further, the decorative value of colour was fully understood by these people, who also placed these polychrome carvings next to pillars covered with beaten sheet brass or silver.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, colours on figures, large and small, representing the retinue or worshippers of the many gods and goddesses had a symbolic significance; the colours of the god Shango, for instance, were red and white, of the god Edschu, yellow, of Obatalla, white, and so forth. In any case, polychrome sculpture was extant in Yoruba long before the country 'came under the impact of western civilization'. The colours used were, and in some cases still are, made of earth pigments, mellow, pleasant colours; the decadence which the author of the article refers to only set in with the import and use of European paints, particularly lacquer and enamel.

In Dahomey polychrome 'swish' reliefs decorate the outside walls of the palaces of Guezo and Glele at Abomey. They go well with the whitewashed walls, and I am unable to see any decadence in this. That reliefs modelled in clay have less 'firmness in style' than those carved in wood stands to reason.

With regard to the author's suggestion for using the dendro-chronological method in order to date a piece of African plastic art, I venture to doubt whether such dating is really of much importance; with the exception of the complicated and sophisticated works produced during the notable artistic epochs of great and powerful kingdoms like those of Ife, Yoruba, Nupe, and Benin, West African plastic art on the whole, and wood-carving in particular, cannot be classified into early, high, and late periods as is the case in other important cultural and artistic epochs in the world's history. In most cases it would not help us at all to date a piece of wood-carving, for the simple reason that once a formula was arrived at, it was repeated with little variation throughout generations; so even if the author should get hold of a statue or a mask (though the dendro-chronological method could hardly be applied to masks), all he could prove by this method would be that it was, say, 100 or 150 years old; that still would not prove that the design, the whole conception, of the carving was of this age, and it is the date of the original design which is interesting, not the date of one or two of the endless repetitions of it.

The author does not seem to be aware of this, for he refers, on p. 188, to the well-known statuette of the kneeling woman with a bowl in her hands which had been considered for a long time as a unique example of its style in Congo art.<sup>3</sup> On account of the 'stylistic similarity . . . . even in the most minute details' of nine specimens which he located in various Museums and collections, the author does 'not doubt for a single moment that they were

<sup>1</sup> I have no personal experience there.

<sup>2</sup> See *Africa*, April 1943, vol. XIV, no. 2, illustration on pp. 68-9: part of the reception hall in the palace at Ikerre, showing polychrome carved posts flanking a pillar of beaten sheet brass. In the back-

ground a door decorated with polychrome carvings and another door covered with beaten sheet brass.

<sup>3</sup> The figure of the kneeling woman with the bowl is used by pregnant women who are poor, or are not able to work, for the purpose of begging food.

all carved not only in the same region, not only during the same period, but by the same artist'. It is true that some of these nine specimens may, by chance, have been carved by the same artist, for I do not know a single African wood-carver who has not repeated designs of ritual and functional significance over and over again, one exactly like the other; but, furthermore, it must be understood, the same figure, with slight variations, may have been made for generations before him, as well as by contemporary carvers of other districts of his country with whom he has no contact.

From this it may be seen how difficult it is to determine the date of figures; when it comes to objects which are completely formalized and only acceptable to the people in exactly this or that design and manner of execution, the dating of these becomes completely impossible. I refer here to large numbers of designs of stools of the Lobi, Ashanti, Yoruba, Ibo, Bamenda, &c.; also to state umbrella tops and linguist staffs of the Ashanti, to cult utensils decorated with symbols or representations of various gods of the Yoruba, and so forth.

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