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HANDBUCH DER AFRIKANISCHEN PLASTIK

Handbuch der afrikanischen Plastik, by Eckard von Sydow, Vol. I., Die Westafrikanische Plastik, 1930, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer (Ernst Vohsen), pp. 496, 10 plates.

TORDAY, Emil

Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, 1931, Vol. 4, No. 2, Apr., 243–245. old.

SINCE Negro art has become fashionable and its products are eagerly sought for, many a book has been published claiming on its title-page that it was dealing with African art. The most cursory perusal of most of these works reveals at once that they are concerned with plastic art only, and even in that they do not go beyond sculptures in the round.

The work before us is an honest, scientific treatise whose title promises no more than it fulfils and which fulfils all that it promises. Herr von Sydow has not only carefully searched most of the principal European museums and some private collections for his material, but has also delved deep into African literature for further information, and the result of his labours bears the stamp of a scholarly mind. His volume, the first of a series, deals with West Africa in the sense attributed to this word by disciples of the *Kulturkreis* school, with which some of his readers are sure to disagree.

The author also makes his own territorial division according to the complex or simple treatment of his subject by the artist. In addition, works of art are divided into two main groups: figures in the round and masks, and decorated objects in which ornamentation in relief or artistic shape are the predominating factors. In the foreword he expresses his intention to consider his material from a purely artistic point of view, regardless of the use for which the object is intended, be it religious, practical, or ornamental.

Such a method presents some difficulties in its application, as in many cases technique, execution, and shape are trammelled by tradition and vary according to the emotions the finished object is intended to arouse. Nowhere is this so clear as among the Bavili and kindred peoples. The rude, even brutal, treatment of ritual carvings is fundamentally different from the delicate, exquisite finish reserved for sculptures which, according to so good an authority as Father Bittremieux, are devoid of all religious significance.

One has but to compare any of the so-called fetishes (in many cases ancestral statues) with the 'Mother and Snake' mentioned on p. 443, or, to use an extreme case, the *Mavungu* nail-fetish on the frontispiece of Dennett's *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind*, with the elaborate group represented in fig. 344 of Johnston's *George Grenfell and the Congo*, to be struck by the fact that the sacred and profane art of the Bavili differ more from each other than many objects of the same character from within and from beyond the West African *Kulturkreis* respectively. A comparison of the Makonde ancestress in Weule's *Native Life in East Africa*, p. 266, with any ancestral statue of the Kongo region, will make this point clear.

The author, quite correctly, refuses to accept indiscriminately museum labels as conclusive evidence of the origin of an object, and the doubts he expresses, the suggestions he makes, are generally well founded and might profitably have been extended. In the monograph on the collection of re-ligious objects of the Tervueren Museum, Baron de Haulleville and M. Coart give with every object all the information obtained with the exhibit, be it vague or precise. Any information going beyond this, added subsequently on the labels, is in the nature of a suggestion by a museum official, and not a statement of fact. By this the author is frequently led astray.

The drummer mentioned on p. 384 of the book under review is described by de Haulleville and Coart as from the Kasai region; the addition of 'Bambala' on the label is guess-work, and the Bunda hairdress of the figure shows that it is a bad guess. The mask attributed to the Bapindi (p. 392 and plate io) is certainly not Bapindi as labelled, but has probably reached this people from the right bank of the Loango river.

The isolated discovery of a new type, as in this case, is an occasion when considerable caution is required, and even when the natives are able and disposed to tell from whom they have obtained it one can

never be sure that the sellers were the original makers. In 1905 the reviewer purchased a statuette among the Babunda on the Kwilu river which, he was told, was obtained from the 'Bakuba', and under that description it was published.

As Herr von Sydow quite correctly remarks, it is obviously of Bena Lulua make; the Bakuba were simply middlemen, and who knows through how many hands it had passed before it came to them? The lovely carving of 'Mother and Child' mentioned on p. 381 must have passed through similar vicissitudes, for it is certain that the Bahuana, to whom it is attributed (and among whom the reviewer lived for about a year), could never attempt to produce anything like it.

Herr von Sydow has vainly tried to locate the Wasara (p. 446); the reviewer is fortunate enough to be able to inform him that he had a rather unpleasant encounter with them in 1902 or 1903 about thirty miles west from Lake Mweru, but that was before sleeping-sickness had reached the region. The use of the letter *ä* in the spelling of their name shows how scrupulously the author follows his authorities; when they are French he faithfully retains their *ou* for *u* and *w* as in Ouassoulou, he respects the Germans' *sch* and in Bajansi (Bayanzi) he retains their *j* for *y* and their *s* for *z*.

Is it not time that the spelling advocated by the Institute were universally adopted in scientific works? In that respect there arises a question which has not yet been authoritatively answered: how are we to deal with the language of peoples whose pronunciation is distorted by some artificial deformation, such as e. g. the Bankutu whose front teeth are knocked out?

Herr von Sydow spells their name Bankutschu as the adults pronounce it; the children of the tribe who have not had their teeth removed say Bankutu as well as their neighbours. Concerning these people, Herr von Sydow quotes the statement of a museum official (without endorsing it) that they are identical with the Basongo Meno. Basongo Meno 'the men with the chipped teeth' (*Songa*, to carve, cut, file teeth, *Menu*, teeth, Morrison's *Buluba Dictionary*) is, of course, not a tribal designation, but a nickname applied to a group of tribes, who practice this mutilation. It has been found convenient by many European writers to use it. But the Bankutu do not chip their teeth, they extract the incisors, and consequently the nickname cannot be and is not applied to them.

It is deeply to be regretted that for pecuniary reasons the number of illustrations in this book had to be curtailed; the text warranted, one is tempted to say required, a great number of plates. The absence of a detailed bibliography may be due to the author's intention of reserving it for the last volume of the series; still, it is a serious disadvantage for the present. These minor criticisms and suggestions will, it is hoped, create no false impression in the reader's mind and make him doubt the excellence of the book. It is by far the best of its kind, and by producing it the author has laid both ethnologists and collectors under a deep obligation.

E. T. TORDAY