

# The Authenticity of African Sculptures

*The issue of authenticity of African art has been central to collectors for decades. Henri Kamer, who was president of the International Arts Experts Association at the time, published an outstanding account of the state of the matter in Arts d'Afrique Noire, No. 12 (1974). The text that follows is extracted from an English translation of that article, and has been edited further. The original includes a number of illustrations.*

The cost of art objects in general and those of black art in particular, has increased during the last thirty years at a dizzying rate. Following the law of supply and demand, quality pieces have reached prices today that were unimaginable only a few years ago. For example, in 1966 at the Helena Rubinstein auction, for which I was engaged as the expert, acquired a Fang head for \$22,000. This had been purchased for about \$9,500 before the war by the Princess Gourielli. Several weeks later, a Swiss collector offered me \$35,000. Today (1974) I have offers varying between \$80,000 and \$100,000 for it.

Still another example: in November 1973, Charles Ratton sold a Baule mask at the Hotel Drouot for the sum of \$50,000, a price never before attained by a wooden art object from the Ivory Coast.

A more recent record has just been set in the price African art. On July 8, 1974, Sotheby's (London) priced a bronze from Benin at £185,000 (about \$500,000). This piece had been sold by the same house in 1931 at about 1/1,000 of the current price.

This extraordinary increase in the cost of African art objects has encouraged hunters in great numbers, Africans as well as Europeans, who no longer hesitate to undertake expeditions demanding a great deal of time and enormous investments in order to obtain pieces for which collectors and museums will eagerly vie against each other.

Accordingly, a parallel activity has developed: the manufacture and sale of copies and fakes. Counterfeits obviously are not unique to African art. A forger copies anything of value; bank notes, jewels, securities, paintings, and art objects of all kinds. A fake, whether it is a postage stamp or a painting, is basically a copy of an original, executed as faithfully as possible. When it concerns art, the expert who examines a doubtful object

or painting devotes himself primarily to compiling all the facts in order to determine if a similar original work has already been catalogued somewhere in the world, eventually to make a comparison between the two. The problem becomes more complicated with "creative" fakes, those not copied from existing works but conceived by an artist and inspired by the style of a given period.

The history of art has known forgers of genius who have attained perfection. For example, Maillefer for his 18th century furniture, Van Meegeren for his primitive paintings, Doccena for his Roman and Greek antiques and Italian *cuatro cento* sculptures. The works of these masters, and they must be called that, had never been in doubt among the experts until the moment when they themselves divulged the truth, undoubtedly prompted by mixed feelings of honesty and the professional pride of the artist.

Van Meegeren could no longer bear idea of his own works being attributed to Vermeer. He found himself arrested for collaboration when he declared that a good number of paintings, which he had sold (especially to Germans) were fakes from his own hand. In the face of general skepticism among the experts, he painted a Vermeer in his cell. Maillefer, after having sold his 18th century French furniture to museums and collectors the world over, felt the need to write a book explaining in detail his techniques of craftsmanship. The reputations of all the experts of the period were tarnished as a result of this publication. Doccena did not copy Greek antiques, he created them. In the same way that Van Meegeren created a Vermeer or Maillefer a piece of furniture. It is no longer a question of copying the original. These men would be classed more in the category of creative artists than in that of the common forger who limits himself to ordinary plagiarism.

An important American museum was very proud of possessing a Donatello bronze. After 20 years of research, the curators concluded that it was, in fact, a work of Doccena. The sculpture continued to remain in the place of honor that it was occupying. The curator simply replaced the name of Donatello with that of Doccena, because in his judgment it was an authentic masterpiece worthy of remaining on public view.

This initiative, which took some courage, was (in my opinion) justified. Not only are these objects more and more in demand by collectors, but their commercial value, already considerable, continues to increase. African art, to my knowledge, has not yet had its forger genius, but it is much more complex and difficult to

determine the authenticity of a black sculpture than that of a painting or a classical work of art, ancient or contemporary.

## **Authenticity and Aagemstheme**

The criteria for the authenticity of art objects (other than the primitive arts) are generally the artist, the place of creation and the materials used and, when necessary, the technique.

The date of creation for ancient works of art is surely the most important element, although at times it is difficult to determine with precision. For example, it is clear that an antique Roman sculpture must have been executed by an artist living under the Roman Empire, or that a Louis XV piece must have been produced under that reign. Contemporary works must date from the lifetime of the artist to which they are attributed. There is a series of scientific tests which permit one to determine if the object dates from the period to which it is thought to belong. An antique Egyptian piece that dates back 200 years, when it should date back at least 2,000, is clearly a fake. A Louis XV piece executed at the time of Napoleon III, if not a fake, is at best a copy, having much less value than the original.

Contrary to what one would think based on knowledge of classical works of art, the authenticity of an African piece has no relationship to its date of creation. Authentic pieces could have been produced yesterday and others will still be produced in the future. It is not necessary to try to establish a precise date for an African sculpture, but rather to attempt to analyze its style and, especially, the reasons for which it was made.

By definition, an authentic African piece is a sculpture made by an artist of a primitive tribe and destined for the use by this tribe in a ritual or functional way, never made for profit. This constitutes one of the first fundamental differences between the so-called primitive arts, to which African art belongs, and other forms of traditional art, which have been created expressly in order to be sold. All artists have lived and continue to live from the sale of their works, whether it be Michelangelo working on the orders of an Italian prince, or Benvenuto Cellini working for the court of Francois, or Picasso producing for his clients. Patronage has always existed and supported artists in Europe and Asia, and the dealers and collectors are actually the patrons of our contemporary artists.

Black art, even in our day, is an art which comes down to us through the ages, a primeval art. The sculptor who creates these fetishes and masks does so without any thought of profit,

in the same spirit that an inhabitant of the Cyclades executed an idol in marble 5,000 years ago. These African pieces could be more or less ancient or very recent, since three quarters of the population of black Africa are still fetishist and continue to practice this religion. Most of the ritual sculptures used are masks, which appear during the religious dances and public celebrations. There are also figurines and large statues which, according to the region, represent ancestral portraits, or fetishes to protect the village and its inhabitants, to conjure against evil spirits, against drought and epidemics, to bring fertility to women, or evil and harm to enemies, such as the nail fetishes from the Bas Congo areas.

Sculptures are for the most part in wood, a few in stone or ivory, and others in an alloy of bronze, gold, or silver. There are also a small number of masks made of raffia, leather, tortoise shell, etc.

If an important event (funeral drought, epidemic) were to take place in a village today, masks and fetishes would be made in order to conjure the evil spirit, and according to their rarity and artistic quality, these objects would have a more or less important ethnographic or commercial value among museums and collectors. Under no circumstances would the inhabitants of the village give them up, and in certain cases they would destroy them or hide them in the bush where they would be lost forever or simply destroyed by termites and the elements.

Usually, African Muslims or Christians who resell them at extremely high prices bring these pieces back to the European market. If the fetishists caught them in possession of these objects, their lives would be in danger. These merchants, generally Dioula, indiscriminately bring back authentic pieces, often of mediocre quality, and recent copies as well as fakes, which are not easily recognized by the untrained eye.

It is evident that a mask made a few years ago, or even today, for the purpose of tribal rituals is an authentic object which has infinitely more value than a 100 year old mask carved on order for a local functionary or as a gift to a governor or a European visitor.

As an example, I had occasion to examine a sculpture coming from the Savorgnan de Brazza family, which had certainly been sculpted expressly for the purpose of offering it to the famous explorer. This piece then dated back almost a century, but other than its historic interest, which gave it a certain commercial value, it could not be classed as an authentic African art object (this is also true of fake Egyptian pieces made for

Napoleon's troops and of pre-Columbian objects from Mexico made for and sold to Maximilian's army). That African sculptor could certainly not be called a forger and he, as well as his descendants, must have continued to produce authentic objects worthy of being included in the most important collections. Because, and this fact is unique in the case of art, a fake African object easily could have been produced at an earlier time than an authentic object. I would even say that these examples are frequent.

The geographic location of the tribe is a very important factor. The style of the works of art produced in the coastal regions has come under European influences which did not affect the less accessible interior until much later. Even today, there are

tribes which have no contact with the outside world, who are sculpting works that could be classed among those of primeval art while at the same time being contemporary.

I have observed that authentic sculptures are classed generally in three principal categories:

1. The objects of the first period, which I call primeval, come to us directly from the ancestral traditions of the bush and the African forest. These are entirely pure and original creations that have not been subjected to any foreign influence. They are extremely rare pieces and are obviously the most in demand.

2. The objects of the intermediary period, which are always worked in the style of the preceding one, have nevertheless undergone certain alterations due to foreign contributions to the culture. Some of them are notably adorned with imported decorative elements: paint of European origin, copper nails, shotgun cartridges, Venetian or Arabian glass beads, some of which may date back several centuries. These objects are equally as valuable and legitimate as those in the first period, although less rare.

3. The style of the objects of the third period is characterized by a marked decadence due to considerable foreign influence. This influence can be either intertribal or European. The sex of the figures is less apparent, being clad in loincloths at the instigation of the missionaries. Some statues even have sandals. The traditional secular forms give way to a certain creative audacity, at times delightful, but showing definite signs of decadence. I would say without hesitation, however, that there are indisputable masterpieces of African art among the objects of the third period.

The stylistic classification of various pieces, Dogon, Fang, Baule

and others, must be the subject of a separate study to be undertaken by ethnologist with a perfect knowledge of the ethnic cultures concerned.

In conclusion, it is essential to state unequivocally that the appearance of a work of art in one of the three periods mentioned above has, I repeat, nothing to do with its date of creation. Some tribes in contact with the outside were producing works of the third period a half century ago, while in our day, others belonging to the same ethnic race will continue to remain in that period for as long as they have no contact with the outside.

We should not, however, totally reject those African objects directly inspired by Europeans; the Lenin bronzes and certain ivories of Portuguese workmanship are examples. The African made fetishes representing everything that appeared to him to be invested with a supernatural power. He went even so far as to draw on Christianity as a source of inspiration.

In the 15th century, when the Portuguese landed in the Boma region and went up river, at first in search of slaves and then to conquer the Congo kingdom, the Africans observed the celebration of the mass, noting especially that before going into combat the troops were blessed by a priest carrying a crucifix. Naturally, they concluded that the victory of the whites was due to the extraordinary power of this fetish, which they adopted and named Kangi Kiditu. These fetishes were for the most part made in a large workshop in the Tomboco region and became the symbol of power and invulnerability. They were carried by important chiefs and have taken their place in the pantheon of sacred Bakongo sculptures alongside the famous nail fetishes. One can only admire the talent of those sculptors who knew how to give an African stamp and style to these objects of such remote origin.

The Dutch, the French, and the English, who only remained for short periods of time, followed the Portuguese armies. However, they always left behind settlers and missionaries, who all had a more or less marked influence on Bakongo art. It should be noted that style of the objects from these areas is almost always figurative, therefore necessarily inspired by Europe, however African it may be in appearance. One must go towards the interior to find the very stylized or totally abstract composition, which is the truly original contribution of African art to world sculpture.

One last example: around 1930, the governor commissioned some sculptors of Lobi to do a group of chairs for which he

furnished the design. This model was directly inspired by the traditional Lobi tripod, but decorated with a double head (Janus head) in profile which recalls somewhat the design of the souvenirs in ebony found in Dakar. These objects were obviously fakes, but later on, the Lobis, having greatly admired this type of chair, continued to construct it for their personal use. This is a typical example of an authentic object having drawn its inspiration from a fake object. The fact, unique to primitive art, that a copy or even a fake could have been executed prior to the authentic object makes the experts' task extremely complex.

American customs laws allow any object dating back more than 100 years to enter the U.S. duty free. A recent law has just fixed the age for objects of primitive art at 50 years. Nevertheless, even the U.S. government admits that the very large majority of black art objects that enter the U.S. duty free are not even nearly 50 years old. As a consultant to U.S. Customs, I have often been called upon to make a decision on the age of objects to be imported. In this country, where everything rests on formal and material proof, I have had great difficulty making the authorities admit that it is impossible to prove the exact age of an African or Oceanic sculpture because they have practically all been done in the same style for several centuries. If this article helps to clarify the misunderstanding on the application of a date for African sculptures, a great purpose will have been served.

The public must become aware of these two facts:

1. It is not possible to set a date for a black art object.
2. If it were possible to do so (for example, based on information concerning the person who collected it or date it was brought back from Africa), this would have no bearing on its authenticity.

Collectors must end the practice of making inquiries as to the age of their pieces or those they wish to acquire, and concern themselves more with the sculpture of the object, its origin, its function, its eventual rarity, and especially its quality. Dealers must refrain from praising the antiquity of an object, declaring that "this is 100 years old", or making similar claims, each more exaggerated than the last. Museums must set an example and avoid publishing catalogues like the one for the centennial of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), in which I was amazed to see objects from the Museum of Primitive Art collection arbitrarily classified under such periods as the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. These objects, moreover admirable ones, which

figure among the most beautiful of African sculptures, should not have been catalogued in this manner. This does not serve the cause of African art, but creates confusion in the minds of the public.

Finally, it is especially important that the experts called upon to judge the authenticity of an object not do so only on the basis of apparent or even real antiquity (for example, on the date at which the piece was brought back from Africa). Nor should they allow themselves to be impressed by the fact that a piece comes from an old collection or that it is shown in an auction catalogue that appeared between the two wars. These indications, all useful at times, are far from being decisive.

### **Copies and Fakes**

Obviously, an object made outside of Africa is a fake. Specialized ateliers exist, notably in Germany, Belgium and France, which produce imitations in known designs easily recognizable by experts. The determining facts are the type of wood used, the technique for obtaining patination, the tool used by the sculptor (for which one must know how to recognize the marks), and finally the style, which remains the essential factor of the expertise.

Where the tool is concerned, the European forger most frequently uses a steel chisel, while the African artist generally employs an adze of forged iron. The trained eye always detects the difference because the marks are made in the opposite direction; the steel chisel upward and the adze downwards, and the chisel marks are usually much longer than those of the adze.

There are also other details, such as the marks of normal wear and the manner in which the holes are bored in order to attach the mask. For example, the European or African forger employs a more or less perfected drill. The native sculptor employs fire-heated iron, repeating the process several times, which invariably makes an uneven hole. A talented forger can also do this, but he does not always think of duplicating the wear in the holes caused by the rubbing of the cords holding the mask in place. The dancer's teeth marks on the bit, which serves to hold the mask, are equally an indication. Finally, on old masks there are the trustworthy traces of erosion, worms, and insects, especially termites.

Some novice forgers are content to take a casting of a famous piece and reproduce it. In this case even a child could tell the difference. But others are more clever and have offered proof of certain originality. One must then examine the patina very

closely, this being the most difficult of all to duplicate. Some are satisfied with dyeing the mask, or even painting it, which is very easily detected by touching it with solvent. In Africa this is the case for numerous mass produced fakes. An ordinary needle and a little solvent are often the basic instruments of a preliminary examination.

A classic patination technique done in Europe consists of burning the wood, coating it with oil, repeating the operation several times, and then polishing the object with wax. It is possible to detect this by introducing a needle horizontally under the surface, which invariably releases ashes if the objects are a fake. But neither is this an absolute proof, for in some areas, notably Gabon and the Congo, authentic objects have been dyed following this process of "patina by fire". Solutions of a base or acid are also used in order to erode the wood's surface. This is equally detectable, either by the naked eye or in the laboratory. Inserting a fine point into the wood duplicates wormholes. Some have even used shotgun pellets. If it is possible to introduce a needle straight into the hole, more than likely it was not made by a worm, which always leaves a zigzag path.

It is generally much easier to detect a fake in wood, ivory, or stone than it is in bronze or gold, in which case one must depend more on the style and the casting. There are numerous fake bronzes made in Europe, which are overcastings, but this process does not escape a specialist. An analysis of the alloy is meaningless, because every native caster comes up with a different alloy, according to which metals were available at the time. As far as the technique of casting is concerned, it is relatively simple for a specialist to distinguish an authentic African lost wax cast from that of a fake coming from a European atelier. The patina is significant only in the case of excavated bronzes dating back several centuries, such as those of the Hittites or Greeks.

Molecular analysis should solve many of the problems, for actually the molecules of a metal several thousand years old stretch imperceptibly, which is one of the reasons for the fragility of an object in antique metal as compared to new metal. But these tests, which in any event are still not perfected, do not apply in the expertise of an African object because casting processes were introduced in black Africa by the Portuguese, and in some cases locally by the Arabs, less than 1,000 years ago.

Generally, the fake bronzes made in Africa are very badly done and usually produced in large numbers. They could hardly be

mistaken for originals, for the Africans do not even go to the trouble of doctoring them up seriously. They prefer working in wood, or even in ivory, which is much in demand by Europeans. I would say that the era of great African casters, those direct heirs of the techniques introduced several centuries ago, has passed. Generally speaking, there are no fake bronzes in Africa that are unique pieces.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the experts and the controls, there are some fakes made outside of Africa in many American and European museums and collections, just as there are forgeries in areas other than black art, notably paintings and classical antiques. Fifteen years ago the development of the carbon-14 process made it possible to date wood objects within 100 years by determining at which moment an organic material has ceased to be radioactive. While this is invaluable for Egyptian or medieval woodcarvings, it is, in my opinion, not very helpful in the case of black art. For, as we have seen above, an authentic object can easily be less than 100 years old. More important, a clever forger will make an object from old wood, thus rendering the carbon-14 test invalid since it determines only the age of the wood, not the time at which it was carved.

A more recent process, thermoluminescence, does not appear to give any better results. I have ascertained on more than one occasion that several examinations of the same object give contradictory results. In order to become convinced, one has only to refer to written reports from the laboratories at Oxford, which were devoted to a thorough examination of the Hassilar terra cotta from Anatolia. Each report on the thermoluminescent test concludes with a different date of firing, therefore dating from a different period, and this is with objects that are strictly identical. The discrepancies varied from 300 to 1,000 and at times 2,000 years. One thing is certain, at least for that which concerns the specific example of the Hassilar. Either they are authentic and all date from the same period (within 2 or 3 centuries), or on the contrary (as I believe is more probable), they are the work of one forger or of one atelier, they have still all been produced at the same time, say, within a period of ten years. This would demonstrate in both cases the extreme inaccuracy of these laboratory examinations. We come now to the fakes in wood made in Africa destined to be sold to tourists or to flood the European and American markets. They are for the most part crudely executed, have no plastic quality whatever, and in general, are done from the same stereotyped model. I do not know of any fakes done as one of a

kind in this category. On the contrary, they are made in large numbers, for hand labor is not expensive and the Africans always sell them. From time to time, a new "style" of fake appears which may pass undetected in the beginning, but which is rapidly followed by numerous arrivals of objects, all of the same type.

We will cite two specific examples on this subject. First, that of the sculptor Paul Tahbou who, with the aid of his son, makes large Bamileke masks of the Batcham type in his Cameroon workshop. These objects are most often done on order and eventually are sold to different collectors. There is a well-documented article on this subject by Dr. Harter in *Art d' Afrique Noire*, No. 3. Another sculptor, Simon Misère, specialized in the production of Kota and Mahongwe reliquary figures at Libreville (Gabon). The artist, himself of the Mahongwe race, is the direct descendant of the last traditional sculptor who lived in the Okonja area and executed the *bieris* according to the needs of neighboring villages. In these two cases, it is evident that analysis of the materials used, of the tool marks and even of the patina would serve no purpose. The two sculptors, each showing certain originality, have recognizable styles.

There are other artisans in Africa, not as well known, who are engaged in the same activities as those of Paul Tahbou and Simon Misère. I know personally a Kuba sculptor at Mushenge in North Kasai, another in the area of San in Mali, who execute traditional objects of their own ethnic group, either on order from Europeans, African dealers, or still for tribal ritual needs. According to the purpose for which it was made and its final destination, the same object could be considered authentic or false. Thus, Simon Misère produced two Mahongwe reliquaries; the first, being sold to the village chief, is perfectly authentic; the second, ordered by a European or an African merchant, falls into the fake category. Moreover, originally these two objects have appreciably the same commercial value. In ten or twenty years, the one which has stayed in the village will be worth a high price (this object will have been consecrated, will have a natural patina, and will give all the appearances of an antique); the other will always be scorned by collectors, insofar as it is a modern piece.

Another troubling factor in black art and existing nowhere else, as we have indicated before, is that not only could a fake piece have been produced at an earlier date than an authentic one, but also the same hand could have produced both. The distinction should be made, however, between sculptors like

Simon Mistre and Paul Tahbou, who only produce objects coming from their own ethnic group, and others, much more numerous unfortunately, who imitate pieces from any area. In this case, they are obviously badly done. In other words, a Mahongwe reliquary executed by a Mahongwe sculptor in Gabon would be more "excusable" and of much better workmanship than a Nimba which should have come from the Baga country in Guinea, but which was instead made at Bamako, in Mali. An object of the style or of the civilization of a given tribe that is executed by another tribe is, in principle, a fake. However, there are exceptions. Some artists have been induced to make ritual, functional or court objects for other regions, either as a gift or to be sold. These objects are completely authentic. On the other hand, objects characteristic of one ethnic group and produced specially for the western market are copies of questionable value, whatever the date of creation. To simplify the problem, I would say that a black art object cannot be definitively classified as a fake unless it is expressly copied from the original for commercial purposes.

Actually, there are numerous and successive productions of objects of the same type that are always similar in design to the preceding series to be found in the heart of the same tribe. In certain regions there are a large number of objects, notably masks that are practically identical, made in numerous copies for the ritual and daily needs of the tribe concerned, from generation to generation in the same village. These objects as well, are indisputably authentic.

In Africa there is no creative artist as such, and the purely decorative object, of which there are so many in Europe and Asia, does not exist. All art is functional, ritual or traditional and is inextricably part of the civilization of the ethnic group. Some pieces are executed with more or less plastic beauty, according to the talents of the creator, who is called an artist but who would more accurately be called an artisan. It often falls on this person to perform the functions of sculptor and caster. He must work exclusively for the benefit of the community, which provides him with food and shelter. He produces the masks and fetishes according to the needs of the moment, always on order of the dignitaries of the tribe and never following his inspiration of the moment, as would any conventional artist.

In effect, that which currently is called an "African art object" was not conceived as such by its creator. The object made in Africa, for the various reasons explained above, became "art object" upon its arrival in Europe. It was even then classed as

"ethnographic and native art". The concept of "black art" became generally accepted only a short time ago.

As far as the copies are concerned, these have always existed in art. The notation, "Roman Copy of a Greek Original", is seen on numerous statues in the Louvre. Those Roman copies have, in turn, been copied during the Renaissance and down through the following centuries. In black art, as we have seen, objects of the same design have continually been redone, and those executed for ritual purposes retain great value as collection pieces.

The current fakes mass produced in the cities in Africa are less dangerous on the whole than those made in Europe, because they are more easily detected. However, copies made in the bush according to traditional practices and having aged in the country under local climatic conditions often pose very difficult problems for the expert. On the other hand, there are also well-classified and well-known styles. But one must guard against classifying the objects which do not exactly resemble the pieces illustrated in books as fakes. Some experts are not sufficiently trained in this respect and have committed very grave errors. There is still a great deal to be learned about Africa. The pieces characteristic of some countries are perfectly indexed, but there are other regions that are still rich in objects awaiting an accurate classification. In the course of my 25 expeditions in Africa I have brought back objects which, at the time, were considered doubtful because they "did not exist", but which are now shown in the largest museums of the world and in the most important works on black art. To cite a few examples, there are the Bambara "queens" from the Bougouni region, the Tellems, the Baga snakes, the Dogon and Bambara irons, the large Nafana masks falsely attributed to the Gourounsi by William Fagg when they first appeared on the market.

One should also avoid classifying an object as fake simply because only a few well-known and well-catalogued pieces existed before the war. As we said at the beginning, the enormous prices paid for African sculptures at times have encouraged the search for such pieces, and many objects of known and unknown types have been brought back from Africa. In the last 25 years the number of valuable objects in existence in Europe and the United States has increased a hundredfold, and I am sure that this is a very conservative estimate.

For example, before the war we knew of only a few specimens of the *kifwebe* mask from the Songye tribe, less than 50 in the world, to give a number. Several hundred have arrived in the

last ten years and have sometimes been classed as doubtful and even fake. The Kurumba antelopes, the large Nimba sculptures, and still many others are also in this category. I wish to remind the reader that at the time of my first expeditions into Africa 25 years ago, only very few of the Dogon sculptures, the Bambara antelopes, and even the Dogon, Mossi, or Bobo masks were known to exist. There were the specimens brought back around 1935 by Marcel Griaule and kept at the Musée de l'Homme of Paris, and those brought back by Lem at about the same time and sold to the Helena Rubinstein Collection.

Around 1955, I was amazed to ascertain that a very large number of specimens of these types, considered extremely rare at the time, were available in Africa. I was not yet aware of the true situation, because after having personally brought back hundreds of them, my successors who visited these areas (Europeans as well as Africans) found several thousand more. The market value of these objects has considerably decreased. A Dogon *kanaga* mask was worth the price of a Fang sculpture or a Kota reliquary around 1948, about \$3,000 (15,000 F at that time). Today they are to be found on the market for about \$500, while a Fang or a Kota, even of mediocre quality, is now priced in the tens of thousands of dollars.

What took place in west Africa twenty years ago continues today in other areas. I will cite briefly the hundreds of pieces brought back from Cameroon, in particular the Bangwa sculptures of which we know only a few specimens, the Dan masks and Baule sculptures from the Ivory Coast, the Bobo masks from Upper Volta, objects from all the ethnic cultures of Nigeria, the Luba and Songye sculptures from Zaire. Some of these objects number in the thousands, and I would not hesitate to add that most of those appearing on the market in the last quarter of a century are far more important than those of the same type known before the war. This has not prevented the proportional decrease in value of a *kifwebe* mask, a Luba sculpture or a Bobo mask.

This is due to the ever-changing situation in Africa. The opening of roads, the creation of airports, and the rapid acceptance of Islami, especially among the young, have induced Africans to dispose of the objects in which they no longer believe. Their growing need for money has done the rest. The search for art objects in Africa continues today with a thorough charting of each area. Sooner or later the virgin areas are systematically visited and cleaned out of all art objects.

Most ethnologists have had to adapt to this new situation,

created by the extraordinary affluence of objects, and revised some of their positions. Jacqueline Delange, Francine N'Diaye, Pierre Meauzé, Jean Laude in France; Albert Maesen, Paul Timmermans in Belgium; Elsie Leutzinger in Switzerland. Roy Sieber and Leon Siroto in the United States have been the forerunners and have applied themselves to studying and reporting on these objects, until then unpublished. I apologize to the many others I am omitting.

Others, unfortunately, have adopted the position of the excavator of the British Museum, William Fagg, who continues to propagate his personal advice with disturbing inaccuracy. He is persistently misleading the public, claiming for instance that there is only one authentic Kurumba antelope in the world (that of the Helena Rubinstein Collection), only two or three *nimb*as, three *kifwebes*, and so on.

One must equally guard against classing hybrid or atypical pieces as fakes, for (as we have seen) artists of some tribes have continually realized works of other tribes, sometimes far away, and this has produced a mixture of styles. This is particularly true of artists working in ivory, as well as casters, because they have been and still are less numerous than the sculptors working in wood and have been called upon to do jewels and prestige objects in styles having no relationship to those of their own people.

I have more than once heard certain ethnologists declare an object fake because they did not know of another piece exactly like it. In addition, especially where court pieces are concerned (royal objects in gold, bronze, or ivory) there are a large number of unique pieces executed on the order of kings or important chiefs in Africa. These objects, which do not serve in the ritual ceremonies, are not of a traditional design. But some are invaluable due to their extreme rarity, indeed of their unique character. One can cite as examples the silver court objects of the Fon Empire in Dahomey, the Benin bronzes and ivories from Nigeria, the various objects from the court of the Moro Naba emperor of the Mossi in Upper Volta, those of the king of the Kuba at Mushenge in northern Kasai, and many others.

### **The Expertise**

We come now to the problem of the expertise. As we have shown, the determination of the production date of an object, which is almost always the single criterion of authenticity in the classical arts, is of no consequence for African pieces. Of all the methods of detection provided by modern techniques, such as the carbon-14 test for organic materials (wood, ivory), molecular

analysis of metals, ultraviolet or infrared rays, as well as thermoluminescence, none are really useful.

Nor can one depend uniquely on technical details, such as the nature of the wood, patination technique, or the tools that were employed. A forger can obtain the right wood or sculpt with traditional tools. Also, it is possible that a perfectly authentic object can be completely lacking in patina. In my judgement, it is much more important that the expert who is called upon to give an opinion on an object have a thorough knowledge of the various details of traditional styles and especially that he possess that rare faculty of having an instinct for quality. To feel the quality of an object is to have a sixth sense which, unfortunately, escapes too many people and places all the responsibility of judgment with the expert. It is possible to learn to recognize the styles characterizing different tribes, their sociology, and their customs through books that have been published on the subject, or better yet, to study them in the field. But taste and a feeling of quality are never acquired. This is innate.

It would be indiscreet to give examples here, but we all know amateurs who, without an special knowledge in the beginning, have succeeded in forming collections that count among the most beautiful in the world as a result of their taste and discernment, at times with very modest means. On the other hand, some specialists who hold a number of impressive degrees and with enormous funds at their disposal have been responsible for disastrous acquisitions which have discredited the showcases of many museums and famous collections for which they have been advisors.

It is relatively easy for someone to become aware of his lack of knowledge in a certain area and to remedy it, but no one is ever conscious of his lack of taste. This is the reason that those who are incapable of perceiving the quality and the beauty of an object suffer an irreversible lack which they will never be able to correct: it is simply because they do not feel the necessity to do so.

An authentic object can be of the highest quality or extremely mediocre. This will substantially affect its commercial value. A fake, on the other hand, has no quality whatever; it is a thing without life. Because that which counts in the final analysis is the capacity to feel something of the soul of the artist, and especially the spontaneity of his move. One cannot overemphasize the hand which creates has not the hesitations of the hand which copies. Therein lies the whole problem. The

connoisseur's eye is not fooled.

An expert must, at the same time, have a wide knowledge of techniques and styles and especially a sense of quality. His advice comes from his inner conviction but, taking into account the extreme complexity of certain problems, this is unfortunately not always sufficient. All experts have sometimes made mistakes, in all fields of art. They can even change their opinions several times on the same object. Large museums are accustomed to taking objects considered as masterpieces from their exhibiting rooms to join the fakes on reserve in storage. This does not prevent the later rehabilitation of the piece in question, which could then reappear before the public in a place of honor. This actually happened about two years ago at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) with a bronze horse coming from Greece and dating from the geometric period. As the director of the museum admits, world experts are absolutely divided on the subject of this piece, which periodically is classed as authentic or fake. Neither examination with ultraviolet or infrared rays, the thermoluminescent method, or molecular analysis has apparently resolved the problem. I have taken the liberty of mentioning this example here because the story has been widely circulated by the American press, but usually this type of incident is handled with the utmost discretion, for obvious reasons.

Many other works of art questioned by the majority of experts are still exhibited in different museums; their withdrawal awaits only the departure of the conservator currently in charge. To conclude, let us say that the advice of experts is rarely unanimous. In effect, there are objects that serve as standards of authenticity and others of falsification, but there are also others that do not offer the least proof one way or the other. Each expert has a "feeling" for the object following his personal criteria. Expertise relies more on instinct than on technically verifiable facts; the idea of certain date does not apply to African objects: the majority among them come under the category where the expert must, above all, obey his own inner conviction.

I turn here to a formula cited by Patricia de Beauvais, in an article appearing in *Paris Match* on September 28, 1974, entitled, "Has the Louvre paid a million dollars for a fake Fragonard?" This remarkable account of the controversy raised by the acquisition of this painting closes on these words: *Battle of experts apropos to which it is fitting to recall this modest*

*definition of a difficult profession among all: "A good expert is an expert who is wrong less often than the others."* The directors of the Louvre, as well as Mrs. Daniel Wildenstein, count among the most important specialists in the world on this subject. However, these highly competent experts, obeying their inner convictions, bring forth diametrically opposed opinions.

Let us say, in conclusion, that there is no universal authority on black art. Africa is a large continent, with large unknown areas. There are experts for certain regions of Africa (Ivory Coast, Congo, Upper Volta, etc.), just as there are specialists in Japanese, Chinese or Iranian art, rather than for all of Asia. A general work on black art written by one author, and there are many of them, is worthless, all the more so because the majority of these books invariably reproduce the same famous objects. It would take a college of ethnologists to write such a book, and preferably those having worked for years in the field, and on the objects.

We all still have much to learn through direct, human relationships with the inhabitants of the African bush, who are extremely reticent when it comes to questions about fetishism. I have personally experienced these relationships and those who have worked as I have, in the bush in daily contact with Africans would certainly not contradict me. It is my hope that such a work, or rather a series of works with illustrations, preferably not yet published, will one day be realized and that a large public will finally see in black art something other than the primitive sculptures whose only merit has been in serving as a source of inspiration for cubism and our modern art at the beginning of the century.