

# ANCIENT and PRIMITIVE ART

## in Philadelphia Collections

DAVID CROWNOVER

Art of any period or time has been seen to pass through a life cycle: dynamic in youth, overcome by nature in middle age, philosophic in decline. Jacques Lipchitz, sculptor, collector, and connoisseur, sees this theory in a new light. He contends that contemporary art is the beginning of a new cycle; that the art of our generation struggles with its creative adolescence. It follows, he reasons, that as adults prefer the company of adults and as children seek the company of their own group, so the cycle corresponds. An age finding itself in the throes of a new creative expression, quite naturally finds rapport with its contemporaries in other cycles. Hence, modern art is fascinated by the unconventionality of archaic periods—for example, the pre-Classical age of Greece or the unrestrained plastic impact of primitive art. Collections of art serve as mirrors for taste in a given generation. This scope of interest is well illustrated in an exhibition held at the Museum this summer. *Ancient and Primitive Art in Philadelphia Collections* brings together a corpus of material that demonstrates the Lipchitz rapport. From the collection of Mrs. S. S. White comes a limestone head of a warrior from the Island of Cyprus. This sixth century sculpture formerly in the Cesnola collection has the direct power of simplified geometric planes(1). Bronzes of the Archaic Greek world are well represented by the collections of Dr. Robert Waelder and Dr. Robert Block and by Bryn Mawr College's Ella Reigel Museum. An outstanding piece is a cauldron attachment in the form of a griffin head, Greek of the seventh century B.C.(2).

Early bronzes from the Orient come from the Richard C. Bull and John Frederic Lewis, Jr. collections. Particularly fine is a patinated bronze chariot ornament with a feline head on a shaft dating from about 1000 B.C.(3). An incised bronze lion of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) captures the spirit of stylization(4). The art of Egypt has been compelling to several collectors, among them Mr. Lewis and Dr. Nelson Goodman. A wooden baboon with a face of bronze dates from the Ptolemaic period(5). An 18th dynasty—about 1450 B.C.—bound slave girl was probably a mirror handle(6).

A primitive bronze from the collection of Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson represents a king from Udo near Benin, of the early seventeenth century(7).



1

Wooden sculpture from Africa has stimulated some fifteen collectors in the area. A large helmet mask, carved by the Senufo tribe of the Ivory Coast, is of the so-called firespitter type(8). Made early in this century, it is in the R. Sturgis Ingersoll collection. A headdress from the Bambara tribe of the French Sudan shows a favorite motive, the antelope surmounted by a human figure(9). This was lent by Dr. and Mrs. Edward Taylor.

The collection is varied and widespread in terms of time and place. The pieces often reflect the personality of the individual collecting. Assembled, they demonstrate also a pulse count of the taste of our time, a sampling of the current cultural climate. It was Rainer Maria Rilke who said that a work of art is of an infinite loneliness. Only when it is loved can it be fairly judged.

Photographs by Reuben Goldberg

