



Pendant masks from Benin. *See Page 44*

AFRICAN NEGRO SCULPTURE

INTRODUCTION

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As you will shortly see—or have just seen—like other racial and ethnic areas, Negro Africa has its own special kind of genius in the art of communication, or in communication by art. The emphases on sculpture rather than on two-dimensional art, on the choice of the human body as the principal subject, on surface texture rather than color, and on the exaggeration of some details at the expense of others, all give Negro art a peculiar flavor which makes it immediately distinguishable from other regional forms. These peculiarities, when a piece is well executed, give it a powerful feeling of the physical and spiritual qualities of the Negro race.

What this art form is, is self-evident; but how it came into being is a mystery, as hidden as the origin of the Negro race that created it. Most of the art objects are of wood. Wood rots quickly in the hot damp soil of West Africa; it is unlikely that any existing pieces are over three hundred years old. Bronze, it is true, withstands better the attacks of time, but bronze is a precious metal imported into West Africa, and the number of pieces cast before the European supply was opened must have been small. Only the beautiful bronzes from Ife in Yorubaland can be dated as early as the twelfth century.

The fetid soil that turns sculpture into humus is also hostile to the preservation of human bone. We have no really ancient Negro skeletal material. Outside the forested part of Africa ancient skeletons have been found in some numbers, but we have not one that can be truly called Negro older than the earliest representations of Negroes in Ancient Egyptian art. Furthermore, the Phoenicians, who sailed around Africa in the seventh century B.C., must have stopped at several places along the coast between the mouths of the Congo and the Senegal, and all they saw were apes, pygmies, or both. Where were the Negroes?

What little archaeological work has been done in West Africa makes it likely that the Negroes really became numerous only about the time of Christ, when they obtained food plants suitable to their climate, partly from southeastern Asia through the Indian Ocean trade, and partly by local domestication. At the same time they obtained from outside a knowledge of smelting and forging iron, to replace the stone implements formerly used.

Whether they obtained their bronze at the same time as their first knowledge of iron working is not known. However, there are several differences between the handling of these two metals that make it unnecessary that both should have been acquired at once. Africa is full of iron ore which can be mined and smelted locally at many places; only a knowledge of techniques was needed. Whatever contact brought it need not have been maintained. Bronze must be imported, and from the time of the first Portuguese explorations it was obtained from European traders. From whom it was first obtained is not known, although the Egyptians are suspected. Furthermore, bronze casting is a much more difficult and delicate craft than iron working; in America most, if not all, bronze casters are bodily imported from Europe. Who brought bronze casting to Negro Africa, and when?

With iron and tropical food plants the Negroes expanded rapidly from their center near the mouth of the Niger River to other parts of Africa, reaching the Cape of Good Hope as late as the seventeenth century. Their tremendous increase in population was made possible by a peculiarity of the Negro blood composition. This is a high incidence of a disease known as sickle cell anemia, which in the double-dose genetic form is fatal, but in the single-dose form protects its owner against malignant malaria. The possession of this disease made it possible for Negroes later on to live in malarial portions of the New World.

Able to live and thrive where white men die, the vast and isolated populations of Western and Central Africa built up kingdoms whose rulers needed works of art as symbols of power, and whose witch doctors and priests needed them also as ritual symbols to enforce their incantations and the spell of their ceremonies and sacrifices. Power needs art to communicate its essence, and in Africa a suitable art was created, in the effective form which you see before you.