TIWI Burial Poles as Sculpture

By JAMES HOUSE, JR.

Nothing in time so much alters the character of the concretion which is a work of sculpture as technological change, in tools, materials, and methods, and the sequential play of the sculptor's imagination upon these developments. This imagination is conditioned by his culture as well as by his craft and by those personal resources which vary with individuals. The old enduring cultures, evidenced by very complex civilizations, continue to overweight their cultural emphases in demands upon their artists and thereby weaken the sculptural craft.

The "primitive" sculptor has been spared this degradation although the social use of his art has remained largely unvaried. His safety as a sculptor lies in the fact that century after century his vitality of concept as an artist is rooted in the communal acknowledgment of living quality within his cultural pattern.

Against the detailed effloresence and channeled patterns which characterized the Western sculptor's imitations of the physical world—materialism supplanting meaning—until the middle of the last century (still existing, though feebly), the art of primitive cultures is seen for what it is, a vital treatment of cultural *meanings* proceeding from its makers and their intimacy with the working of available materials. These materials are the same as used to create utility items which have become more dependable in service and duration as the workers have learned to make forms consistent with the maximal structural strength characteristic of materials used. Their road to this knowledge has been the long one of empirical trial and error, and the artisan lessons there learned are the basis for the constant persistence of the "primitive" sculptor's appreciation of materials and the potential of his tools.

Common beliefs enlisted all craftsmen for an aim differing from structural-utilitarian shapes. They sought to bestir the onlooker through the innate character of his optical equipment, its nerve conduits running to the apperceptive brain, seat of meaning. To achieve such reception by others within the communal group, and that this reception accord with the carver's intentions, demands that the carver create possible forms which by themselves and in relation one to the other will arouse the feelings he intends. Thus the carver becomes a sculptor. From there on, he is limited only by his tools and by his inventive usage of them, which thus extends their shaping capacity beyond the needs which had led to their invention.

Since the very early part of this century when the strange vitality of African sculpture, arising from its form alone (the creative literary and visual artists of Paris then knew little of the cultural institutions generating its creation and less of its tribal usage) became a welcome source of redemption of Occidental art, "primitive" sculpture has become a rage. With the rapid incrustation of the West upon primitive cultures, it has become more and more a thing of the past, its cultural sources drying up. Some time ago archaeology was left the task of finding anything new in "primitive" art.

Fortune often defies space and time, the implication being that it jumps extraordinary distances through illimitable time. As recently as 1954, she crossed fifty miles of water (and eons of time) and brought back several pieces of sculpture in the round from a little known "stone age" culture, and with them an extensive photographic record of aboriginal sculpture *in situ,* the processes of its creation, and its use within the culture. Its quality is high; its use involves complex sculptural relationships.

The three-dimensional power of fully rounded "primitive" sculpture in wood—that is, its continuing demand upon the spectator to see it from all "sides"—was recognized shortly after "primitive art" was transformed from ethnographic material to art. Sculptors have known from the beginning of the craft that the form of the material to be carved conditions the concept of any work of sculpture. The cylindrical tree possesses a curving surface which invites the viewer to go around it, the cylinder being intrinsically a three-dimensional form in the visual and tactile senses, a state which all full-rounded sculpture must attain if it is to be of good quality.

"Primitive" sculptors have utilized distortion or transformation of human and animal forms with only occasional intervention of "abstract" forms, so formal in shape that whatever symbolism they hold must be explained by the aboriginal makers. The Tiwi people of Melville and Bathurst Islands, off the northernmost tip of Australia, have, at least since the first accounts going back to 1824, utilized "abstract" forms in their burial poles with rare, and perhaps recent, excursions into anthropomorphic forms. The abstract poles are in many instances (in name, at least) anthropomorphic in symbolism.

The burial poles are covered with painted formal designs; only one seen by the 1954 expedition contains any recognizable semblance, as of fish, reptiles, canoes, and humans. Tiwi designs are preponderantly and traditionally "abstract," and even today, when colors of commercial manufacture are obtainable, are rendered more often than not in locally obtainable colors, yellow, red, white, and black. The meanings of the painted designs have no relationship to the meanings of the sculptural forms upon which they are painted, and each repeated single form may be assigned different meanings on other poles and even on the same pole.

Basic sculptural forms are few: all except the plane and the spiral are used by the Tiwi. The cylinder, cone, sphere, rectangular and triangular prisms, and the rod are used for solid forms. The rod in combination with heavier solids is also used to incorporate space as a sculptural element. They use these raw (with little variation), use few forms in a pole, and exercise that sophistication of proportioning characteristic of most primitive tribes. The structure of wood permits a narrow elongated form capable of carrying a large form of far greater weight, illustrated here in photos showing carving and painting a pole. When I expressed a wood-sculptor's delight in this pole, Jane Goodale told me that her native informants rated its maker as their best local carver, and added that his are the most precisely executed poles she saw. Their restriction to large elementary forms is partially due to the size and nature of the one carving tool used, the steel axe which has succeeded the stone axe.

The executed forms, seen solely from the sculptor's angle, omitting cultural considerations, are a product of the malleability of the material employed under the shaping tools. The bloodwood tree is a very hard eucalyptus, chosen for the poles because of its resistance to weathering and the prevalent termites of the humid clime. The poles stand for forty to fifty years about the graves, rapidly losing their water-soluble surface designs, so leaving visible for more than four decades only the sculptural forms of each pole in relationship to the other poles about the same grave, and frequently to poles of a nearby grave.

For a primitive a most unusual cultural attitude intrudes (superior to and directly opposed to our American practice), which may well be the crux of the sculptural-design vitality characteristic of their work. The same way of life existing over a long period of time is usually not tolerant of change. The Tiwi have an incentive to keep the creative appetite well whetted, and it is a simple one. Social prestige requires a creative mind. This ready alertness for giving an original twist to age-old ceremonials or intruding a new item is expected. They also use over and over again that which satisfies them.

There is no direct ethnographic evidence that this attitude plays a part in carving the burial poles. Yet no two seen by the expedition in the Snake Bay region of Melville Island are the same in their combination of forms, despite their constant use of the generic basic geometric solids. Very possibly there exists a carry-over of the creative attitude found in song and dance,

into their most important field of visual creativity, the pole carving.

Many poles are in themselves extraordinarily exciting sculpturally. But no pole is created to be used alone. During the "payoff" ceremonies they will stand in a straight row, and afterwards they are moved to stand about the grave in a more or less ovoid-shaped group. When one sees them in either of these destined arrangements, one is conscious of their *differences* in design and not of their similarities, though the pole-shape is a definite unifying factor. In circuiting either arrangement and by changing eye-level, the spectator experiences constantly changing relationships. Several poles about a grave present an infinity of combinations with poles on the opposite side being seen moving across the intervals between those nearest. Consider that the dances and mourning rites not only go around the group but rush toward it and penetrate it; one will then realize the emphases of spectral reality embodied within the geometric solids, as released by varied speeds and moving vantage points which are the spectator's paths.

These *fully rounded sculptures in a group* are related to the space and the grave within, and to all space without, as they stand in the open air against only the extending landscape—a concept unique in "primitive" sculpture. Such ideas are new in Occidental sculpture and have followed upon the consciousness of "space" as a form element in tune with our contemporary world, publicized by the "Constructivists" in their 1922 manifesto out of Moscow. Thus far none of the writers on Australian art have, to my knowledge, emphasized the Tiwi poles as fully rounded sculpture of a high order. They have considered them only in their ethnographic field.

Not only are variety and proportion a subtle and ever-pleasing keynote of each grave group, but if one can (by miraculous concentration of attention) isolate one pole from another, he will find that members of a "stone age" culture, leading a repetitive life within narrow limits, have continuously produced different—and so ever new—major sculptural monuments. The inroads of civilization have added means and ideas for the continued development of this art rather than caused its decay. Only if the ceremony itself, the reason for making the poles, is overthrown by civilization, will the vitality of the art die with it.

Some examples of these poles are in Australian museums, two were recently acquired by a museum in Basle, Switzerland (these are anthropomorphic in sculptural form) but the only examples—and these a complete group—in this hemisphere are in the University Museum. This "coup" was executed by Dr. Goodale who had the macabre foresight to commission several workers to carve burial poles for her own (unscheduled) funeral. I have since learned that her visual delight and that pervasive conceit in human achievement characteristic of all of us was a life-celebrating motive in her decision. For the first time they appeared in a comprehensive show, the University Museum's exhibit "Art of the South Pacific" in 1955, and they were then shown in a single line, the "payoff" arrangement, which is one of the two ways they should be seen.

In their relation to the sculpture of the Western World—and this is a brief venture in that direction—no one knows what time, a distilling instrument of all opinions, will say, but with some conviction I submit the following.

Because of their experienced and expert use of elemental geometric forms in fully-rounded sculptural combination, if they could somehow have seen the sculpture of that sophisticated conscious seeker for the secrets of sculptural power lying within basic geometric solids, the late Constantin Brancusi, the Tiwi with creative conscience would have adopted him into the tribe, making him an honorary citizen in the best Western traditions. Likewise, had Brancusi known the carving-groups of these aborigines, he might well have become a leading advocate of the worthiness of their work among world sculptures.

Following the last moment of the funeral ceremonies, the poles exist as gifts to the dead and no more attention is paid them by the natives. This is characteristic of all creative artists. The work at hand is important. When it is finished, its maker's interest in it is gone—unless it be for monetary or publicity reasons (self-conscious reasons). The creative Tiwi carver looks to the next carving, feeling with all sculptural creators that the joy lies in the act of conceptual-embodying processes.

Miss Goodale's commissioning was foresight. There is no such thing as hindsight in the commissioning of burial poles. But the Providence of Affinity might well commission several Tiwi sculptors to make burial poles for the grave of Constantin Brancusi—fundamental like unto like.