

¶ The Purposes of the University Museum

¶ To give to Philadelphia a Museum that will be in keeping with its traditions, that will answer to its needs and that will sustain its historic repute as a Stronghold of Civilization.

¶ To assemble collections that will illustrate the achievements of Mankind in the field of Art, and to cherish and preserve this Heritage from the Past.

¶ To trace the origins of Civilization and to reconstruct the successive steps and the varied episodes that have attended its development.

¶ To encourage the Arts; and to demonstrate the debt that Civilization owes to the Artist and to the Craftsman.

¶ To encourage Research, to send out exhibitions to excavate the buried cities of Antiquity and bring to light the records of the Past; to gather and preserve the early Arts and ancient Lore handed down by the vanishing races of Mankind.

¶ To promote a knowledge of Humanity and to disseminate that knowledge by lectures, by publications, by cooperation with the schools and through the medium of the University; to illustrate the unity of all races and the diversity of their Art, to inculcate a better and more sympathetic understanding of all peoples and to afford a just measure of the contribution that each has made to Civilization.

¶ By bringing the people into direct contact with the visible Past and its prolific life, to exert a civilizing and humanizing influence upon our manners and habits of thought.

FOREWORD

Prior to 1912 the University Museum possessed a group of 19 small objects from Great Benin presented by Mr. Ling Roth in 1897. They consisted of an ivory armband, nine light bracelets, two small plaques, a mask and six small ornaments. These personal ornaments were published in part in the *MUSEUM BULLETIN* for January, 1899.

In 1912 the Museum acquired the first of its bronze and ivory altarpieces: heads and carved tusks, together with some other art objects. In December of that year an account of these objects was published in the *MUSEUM JOURNAL*. During the ten years that have intervened the Benin Collection has been increased from time to time as opportunity offered by the addition of selected specimens bought in London and the Museum is now able to afford the student of Benin Art an opportunity of observing it in all of its phases and in most of its details. Among the objects of first importance are the furnishings of a Royal Altar, an outstanding and picturesque feature of the West African City. This altar group has not been transported entire and re-erected, but assembled one piece at a time. The pieces have been placed on a model of an altar in an order and arrangement which is faithful to descriptions and pictures by writers who knew Great Benin at a time when such altars were in use or at the moment when that use was suddenly interrupted.

Including the objects on the altar there are in all about two hundred specimens in the Museum's Benin collection. Other collections similar in kind are in the British Museum, the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford and the Berlin Museum. Benin art objects are rarely obtainable now. All of the pieces shown in the University Museum were collected in 1897 by members of the expedition that visited Great Benin in that year, when the human sacrifices were stopped and the King made a prisoner.

Great Benin was the last example of the old style Barbarism that has furnished history with one of its principal motives from the beginning. That barbarism may very well be represented by its altars. In the Museum we have set up an altar such as might have been seen in Great Benin prior to 1897 and I am not aware that any detail has been omitted from its furnishing of idols, heads, tusks, bells and staves, but realism could not be attained without the presence of a sacrifice, for the altar required human victims and it was usually wet with blood and reeking with fresh offerings.

The chief interest of the collection however is not derived from its former association with a bloody ritual but from its very extraordinary artistic character. It is from this point of view that readers of the JOURNAL are invited to consider the collection from Great Benin. The objects that make up that collection would not be intelligible however if viewed apart from the customs and beliefs with which they were so intimately related and that undoubtedly lent form and substance to the whole artistic output. Like the art of other African peoples on the West Coast and in the Congo Basin, the fetish is the central and imposing fact and the artist's work is responsive to beliefs connected with fetish worship.

The fetish and the potent spells for good or ill, ancestor worship and a belief in watchful powers readily moved to make or mar—this tremendous background of belief and of tradition from which the idols emerged under the sculptor's hand as the embodiment of the great realities of his conscious existence, directed the artistic impulse and presided over the creative work of the craftsman.

The service of the gods or of the powerful spirits that directed human affairs for good or ill was not the only occasion for the exercise of the artistic faculty or the practise of craftsmanship. The same talents and the same skill were called forth in the making of personal ornaments and the decoration of more commonplace things, but it is clear enough that the great school of art was the Juju house with its priestly ritual, the central structure in a powerful state religion that acted strongly on each individual and put its stamp on the general consciousness.

An examination of the collection in the Museum will not fail to reveal the fact that creative art in Benin fulfilled its greater tasks in connection with fetish worship, which made the chief demand on the artist's resources and furnished the most powerful incentive to creative effort. In that school the artists of Benin acquired a knowledge and skill that appear to have been extended to personal and domestic uses. The themes employed in personal ornaments, plaques and utensils, true to their traditions, are apt to be reminiscent of the fetish and to point in the direction of magic and the supernatural. The art of representation, exhibited at its best in the bronze plaques and also in the carved fetish tusks and heads, is closely assimilated to the traditional ideas and modes of thought. There are examples of pictorial art that have no apparent relation to religious subjects or practises and that nevertheless employ the same

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methods and the same technique and sometimes the same forms as the altarpieces. There are also examples of ornament in the form of conventional patterns and these also are common to all classes of objects whether identified with the fetish altars or with objects of purely secular use.

It all ended in a rich and extraordinary accumulation of traditional art that was dispersed at the taking of the City and that is now to be found only in some half dozen museums, a possession of civilization.

In the paper that follows Mr. Hall presents the results of a scholarly study of Benin art, as represented by the Museum collection and in its relation to the native life and customs.

G. B. G.