

First NA Serial Rights
1,385 words

THE KINGDOMS, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY
OF
AFRICAN TRIBAL ART

Written by June Grayson, Photographed by Richard Grayson

You might say that E. Eliot Benezra, M. D., has a sub-

specialty in masks. In his consulting room, this Chicago psychiatrist helps his patients find out what's behind their masks. In the African room of his suburban home, Dr. Benezra studies the origins of his own burgeoning collection of African tribal masks and sculptures. The insights gained from either discipline illuminate the other one. Modern man is not as different from members of those African tribes as he might think.

"I have always been interested in the history of mankind with its vanishing art and cultures," says Dr. Benezra. "So ten years ago I went to Africa with a group of physicians from my medical society. I was eager to see African people in their everyday lives."

"But African was not the way I imagined it to be, although my fantasies were probably based on old Tarzan movies. We did get to see some native animals in a national park but our guide could almost call them by name. And we saw some ceremonial dances performed for tourists. The Africa I sought, however, had already disappeared."

"I did not think of Africa again until a dinner party five years later in a home filled with African art - bronzes, terracottas, wood carvings, figures, and masks. I finally saw in suburban Chicago what I had hoped to see in Africa - the very

essence of its art and culture."

Dr. Benezra bought the first piece of his collection that very night from an African importer who also attended the party. The carved, wooden divination bowl remains one of his most prized possessions.

African art should never be called "primitive." In fact, it is highly sophisticated art, rich in its diversity. The truth is that primitive art in general, as well as the craftsmen and artists who create it, is not primitive at all, but the result of centuries old, elaborate traditions. Westerners still have a long way to go to understand the cultures that produce such art.

African rock art has been dated back to 9,000 B.C. What the Europeans merchants and missionaries to African found from the fifteenth century onwards were not the simple, barbaric curios of a newly, enlightened people but evidence of two thousand years of African creative genius.

It took the Parisian artists of the early twentieth century to proclaim the artistic merit of African tribal art. In fact, influences from African masks and statues have been found in the works of the Cubists and Surrealists. These artists insisted that naturalism was not the only way an artist could express

himself and that African art represented a different, but no less valid, reality.

Picasso said that "primitive" sculpture" has never been surpassed. In a painting by Picasso in 1907, Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. No. 114), the heads of the dancing nude figures are clearly based on African masks.

"African art is rooted in religion," continues Dr. Benezra. "And African religion is generally based on animism, the assumption that supernatural power resides in all parts of creation - human, animal, plants, rocks, and rivers - and that this power can be tapped, controlled, and directed by ritual means. Animism believes that both animate and inanimate objects possess an innate soul. Even the dead retain this force. So the departed ancestor spirit, the spirit of an animal killed in a hunt, or even the spirit of a tree cut down, may constitute a danger to the tribe until they appease it by sacrifice or other rituals. In the case of a dead ancestor, a sculpture or a mask may have to be made to provide a home for the wandering soul and to focus that power to help the living."

"African art is conceptual, not naturalistic," Dr. Benezra says. "It does not represent an object as seen by the eye. A mask does not represent fear. It is fear itself. Each sculpture

gives us a message about the mysteries of creation, religion, history, and social structure."

"Such animism is not too far-fetched from our western culture, especially around Halloween," observes Dr. Benezra.

"Houses are haunted by ghosts. People are bewitched and cursed. Even though we deal with this humorously at Halloween, freaky things continue to happen throughout the whole year in our own lives and in the lives of others. I sometimes wonder if it is counterphobic for me to have these art objects in my own home - perhaps a way of keeping unconscious personal fears of magic and mysticism at bay."

African tribal art usually refers to African south of the Sahara. Northern Africa developed differently because its Moslem religion proscribed the making of images.

Most of Dr. Benezra's collection is from central and western African tribes. Since wood does not last in that climate, his wooden pieces are from this century. He usually buys from the importers he met at the dinner party when they return on their yearly trips to the United States. Some antique shops also specialize in African art.

A single mask may cost from \$100.00 to a \$1,000.00. Larger figures may cost several thousand dollars. Still, Dr. Benezra

believes that an African art collection can only increase in value. "Fine art museums have elevated tribal art to a major art status," explains Dr. Benezra. "The Metropolitan Museum in New York has an outstanding collection of African art. Although most of the American collectors I know are white, I should think that collecting by black professionals will increase as they can afford to travel and buy the things that attest to their roots."

Happily, African art is not dying. Although some recent African political regimes have tried to stamp out tribal customs to promote modernization, most modern African leaders hope to encourage the continuation of both traditional and modern artistic achievements.

If you travel to African today, you can probably start an African art collection by purchasing African "airport art" - ivory jewelry and hand-carved wooden figures in the Nairobi airport for \$5.00 to \$20.00.

"You can tell if a piece of African art is authentic or just made for the tourist trade," Dr. Benezra says. "Examine the masks for sweatmarks or erosion by termites."

Collectors who want one-of-a-kind pieces for their collections will probably have to establish a working

relationship with a specific antique dealer or an African importer, as Dr. Benezra has.

Then comes the fun of research, for many dealers don't really know the background of an item which they may sell. Tribal characteristics can be recognized by the posture of an image, bodily proportions, the shape of the torso, details of a headdress, scarifications of the skin, the shape of the different features, the type of dress, and the ornamentation. Each tribe in African may have some unique feature that is identifiable by an art connoisseur or anthropologist.

"When you start a collection like this, you can never see how it is going to take over your life," continues Dr. Benezra. Even when Barbara says - enough, enough - I can only say - one more, one more."

According to Barbara Benezra, African art grows on you. "The more you are exposed to it, the more you appreciate it. You see different things. It is an adventure for both of us whenever we buy another piece."

"The nicest thing about this collection," Dr. Benezra continues, "is that my wife doesn't need to dust it. Repairs and maintenance are non-existent. In fact, the pieces should not be dusted, they should not be polished, and they should be left just

the way they are after years and years of exposure to the elements. They are supposed to be cracked and scratched. They do take up a lot of space, however, and that becomes a consideration."

"Art collections used to be restricted to kings, the church, and a privileged few," Dr. Benezra says. "Now collecting can be a passion of an ever-growing number of people. The use of masks has been known in every culture - to hide and to reveal. We can only enrich our own lives as we appreciate the lives of others."

#####