

## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN ART

In the introduction to his book, *African Art*, Pierre Meauze refers to carving as a dialogue between man and matter.<sup>1</sup> He does not specify what he means by this statement but if it is his intention to let African sculpture speak for itself he is to be credited for his accomplishment, for the book contains beautiful pictures of some of the most well known pieces of African sculpture. However, as the following inquiry seeks to indicate, it is not possible to fully understand the sense in which carving is a dialogue between man and matter without an initiation into the world of African art. It is therefore the aim of the following inquiry to reveal the sense in which Meauze's statement accurately reflects African sculpture in particular and African art in general. It is necessary, at the outset, to point out that an initiation into the world of African art is not simply an intellectual process. As is the case with other African initiations, it is a process that involves the entire being of man.

Individuals who have shown serious interest in African art have recognized the necessity of consulting African culture in

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Meauze, *African Art: Sculpture*, Cleveland, World Publishing Co., 1968.

general for a greater understanding and appreciation of the visual experience. In reference to art “objects” in Africa Anerson has correctly observed:

A comprehension of cultural environment which nurtures them, and the religious and philosophical system which shaped them, will assist us to see these objects not just as works of art but as integral parts of African way of life.<sup>2</sup>

It is commendable to let African sculpture speak for itself but I believe that the power and depth of this sculpture can still make greater sense if the elaboration of the meaning of the essence of carving is undertaken. The clarification of the statement that carving is a dialogue between man and matter can open up a horizon for the understanding and appreciation of African sculpture. It is not so much a matter of replacing a visual experience with words as one of enriching such an experience with the aid of another medium.

Sculpture, at least in Africa, is not exclusively destined for the eye. It is also destined for the ear, for the sense of touch and for all other senses as well. Furthermore, it is equally true that it is not destined for the totality of senses. Since man is not an assemblage of parts or of physiological systems, sculpture is, above all, destined for the whole man; that is, the man who is presupposed by atomistic physiology. Likewise, carving is not simply an activity of the hands with the aid of eyes and the brain. It is the whole man who carves and, as such, carving becomes the means by which the essence of man manifests itself. Carving, as is the case with art in general, is an elemental form of human expression and, hence, it is irreducible to any other form. However, it does not exist in isolation from other elemental forms since all human expressions radiate from man. Each in its own way is a reflection of man and as such it is, in a sense, open to all others.

Sculpture, African or non-African, does not come into being the way that “natural” things such as plants do. It is not simply found lying out there in the way of rocks and, clearly, it does

<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Anerson, *Tradition and Change in Yoruba Art*, Sacramento, E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1974, p. 9.

*Towards an Understanding of African art*

not fall from the sky as if it were rain drops. It is made by human beings, the same beings that have the exclusive gift of using words. In its primal essence, carving is rooted on the same ground as the essence of speech. The being that dialogues is the same being that carves. The attribution of carving and dialoguing to man does not pose a problem to many of us. But when man is projected as having the possibility of dialoguing with matter in the form of carving we run into a serious problem. A dialogue presupposes, among other features, a shared sense of being and conscious sense of reciprocity. If these features are essential to dialogue we are immediately in the face of an enigma if we accept the definition of carving as a dialogue between man and matter. To many of us dialogue between man and man is not incomprehensible. But in what sense can man be said to dialogue with matter? How, for example, can man dialogue with a tree? How is mutual understanding between man and the tree possible? What is the ontological bond between man and the tree that allows for the possibility of dialogue? Is the concept of dialogue being misused? Isn't dialoguing a characteristic of higher organisms that exclude what we ordinarily regard as things? Is it sufficient at this juncture to say, "Look, don't ask?" Should the interrogation be stopped or silenced now so that attention can be turned to carving to see how the supposed dialogue takes place? Are we compromising the essence of carving by talking about it? But if we confine the essence of carving to seeing can't we still ask what is seeing? Is the eye still a human eye if it has a private domain from which the whole man is excluded?

The above questions are generated by, and in the effort to discover, the essence of carving—a discovery that, if successful, will entail the discovery of the essence of art. It is, moreover, clear that carving is, ultimately, unintelligible if the essences of both man and matter are not made manifest. Meauze's statement is not to be viewed as the one that occasions these questions and, consequently, it is not necessarily to him that we must turn for the clarification of the statement. The questions primarily arise from the concrete process of carving in Africa and it is this process that ultimately must provide the answers to the questions and meaning to the statement. Meauze grounds his thought on African

art on the same phenomenon that others have observed. He tells us:

In Sudanese grasslands, for example, the carpenter-sculptor goes into spiritual retirement (isolation, meditation, chastity) before setting out to carve a mask or the image of the mythical ancestor. He implores the tree to forgive him the removal of one of its branches, and only then begins the task.<sup>3</sup>

A similar observation is made by Underwood:

The forest where the wood of the mask grows is a living realm ruled by a population of venerated spirits. Man is but a part of this living realm. To cut down a tree, therefore, without proper ceremony and propitiation rites might give dire offence to the spirits. A priest must be consulted. He, in turn, may consult the spirits of the trees, ask these forgiveness for what is explained as a necessary act of destruction. In some cases the carver must use tools used for no other purpose, and they too must be blessed by the priest—perhaps, with sacrifice. Before beginning a representation of a higher divinity, a carver may have to undergo purification and observe abstinence, may be for a long period before, during and after completion of work. To cut down a tree is to take life, which means to dislodge a spirit from its abode. A spirit so abused, if not placated, might act revengefully against the offender, his kinfolk or whole tribe.<sup>4</sup>

Just as a child inherits parental genes so does sculpture inherit the the essence of its sources. For this reason, the intelligibility of sculpture is in part dependent on the intelligibility of carving and, ultimately, on the intelligibility of man and matter, since it is their union that gives rise to carving. As pointed out in the above observations, the creative process that produces sculpture involves more than technical skill. The truth of man and the truth of matter blend together to produce the truth of sculpture. This blending is possible because the two truths have a kinship. This is evidenced by the manner in which the sculptor approaches

<sup>3</sup> Meauze, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Underwood, *Masks of West Africa*, London, Alec Tiranti Ltd. 1964, pp. 20-21.

## *Towards an Understanding of African art*

the material he works and the way the material responds to his invocation. The two truths have an internal relation and, in a sense, are a reflection of a common truth. The art of body painting or of body scarification in Africa is an obvious instance of this truth. In either art the artist and the material he works with are one and the same. Through the body, which he is, man is echoed in his being by the rest of matter, for the body itself is an expression of the truth of matter. The polarization of man and matter obscures the truth of both. This results in the obscuration of sculpture itself. Possibly, it is the attempt to avoid this obscuration that leads Trowell, in reference to African masks, to say:

If for us the mask or ancestor figure is no more than a dead carving in a museum case, we can have no sense of its effect upon the observer who knows of all the ritual which has gone into its making, of the spirits which have had to be propitiated, and of the life force which it now contains which watches or takes part in the dance of which it is an accessory, and which will benefit, together with the family or other members of the society, from the successful carrying out of liturgy and movement.<sup>5</sup>

When African sculpture is removed from its African context it is usually subjected to the process of objectification. This is especially the case when it is moved to the West and exhibited in Museums or galleries or hung in living-rooms. These locations are the graveyards of African sculpture. When exhibited in these locations it loses its potency and is ultimately immobilized. It becomes an object *par excellence*. As it becomes an object it is reconstituted and, thereby, loses its Africanness. An understanding of this reconstituted entity should not be confused with an understanding of African sculpture. The African sculptor, as is the case with other African artists, does not have an eye to being exhibited and neither does he intend to have his work transformed into a spectacle from which he derives personal satisfaction. He reproduces himself in what he produces. Since he is what he produces, it is inappropriate to introduce the

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Trowell, *Classical African Sculpture*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1970, p. 21.

subject-object dichotomy in the attempt to understand him or his product. Likewise, since in Africa man is fundamentally viewed as a social being, the sculptor sees both himself and his product socially. It is in the same light that he and his product are seen by others. The community at large is reflected in the sculptor as well as in the sculpture. As such, the community does not have an objective relation with the sculpture. Neither the sculptor nor the sculpture could exist or be intelligible outside the community. Objective relation collapses on the face of this fundamental unity and unless there is an awareness of this unity it is not possible to fully grasp the essence of African art.

The concepts of "subject" and "object" appear to have no place in the conceptual framework of African art and this contrasts sharply with the conceptual framework of modern and contemporary Western art. For example, a painting by Picasso is viewed as an art *object*. It stands in opposition to the *subject*, i.e., the viewer. The relation between the two is not reciprocal. The viewer does not become the viewed and neither does the viewed become the viewer. Objects lack the subjective power to view. That is, they do not have a viewpoint. They are simply lying out there without consciousness. They exist for consciousness but consciousness does not exist for them. This condition of pure exteriority of both subject and object vanishes in African art for the subject is on the side of the object and *vice versa*. For this reason African art does not appear exhibitory. The absence of museums and galleries in Africa is, in this case, revelatory. It is not simply an absence of institutions that ought to be there. It is a statement of a *bona fide* conception of art. The emergence of these institutions cannot but alter the conception of art in Africa. Moreover, if such an alteration were to occur it would transform the awareness that Africans have of themselves. Ultimately, it would alter their world. The absence of museums and galleries in Africa attest to the fact that art permeates the life of Africans. In Africa one makes a beautiful dress to wear it or to have it worn, one carves or makes a beautiful musical instrument to play it or to have it played. A mask is made for religious or ceremonial activities. Even in cases of family shrines in places such as Nigeria the collection of carvings is not preserved for exhibition. The collection is so intertwined with the family's

## *Towards an Understanding of African art*

life that to exhibit it is to exhibit the family itself. A tour to view such a collection is un-African. If there is anything like “art for art’s sake” in Africa it is so thoroughly integrated in African life that it is almost indistinguishable. When it becomes distinguishable it is an anomaly. Those who confine art and products of art to the “use-less” realm do so under the presupposition of a criterion of art whose universal applicability is questionable. Those for whom the products of art stand in opposition to the artist or to the viewer are bound to be confounded by the art process and by art products in Africa.

To introduce objects endowed with consciousness, that is objects that take on a subjective quality, and to address the material out of which art products come into being is to introduce disorder in the realm of objects as well as in the realm of subjects. It is to introduce chaos in language. It is this crisis of language and, hence, of understanding and of perception of the world that confronted the first wave of Westerners in Africa. A disturbing element was introduced in the system of conceptualization and in theory of sensation. The canons of language, of understanding and of perception were different in Africa compared to those in existence in the West at that time. The artistic realm as well as the non-artistic realm presented cases where the line between subject and object was blurred. Westerners could not understand how it was that objects were treated as persons. The Portuguese, for example, viewed the African works of art as fetishes or idols and concluded that Africans had a fetishistic or idolatry attitude towards the world. Africans, they concluded, were superstitious about themselves and about the world. Later, as the notion of evolution gained ground in Europe, Africans were perceived as occupying the lower rungs of the evolutionary scale. Hegel, the German philosopher, tells us in his *Philosophy of History*:

Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained, for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world, shut up; it is the gold land compressed within itself—the land of childhood which, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night...

The peculiar African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that, in reference to it, we must give up

the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or law—in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being the African, in the uniform undeveloped oneness of his existence, has not yet attained: so that the knowledge of an absolute being, another and higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.<sup>6</sup>

The African, as he emerges from the African world of art, tends to confirm Hegel’s conception of the African. After all, one who treats objects or things of nature as if they are one’s counterpart cannot be distinguished from them. For Hegel, art process is not a “natural” process, for, in his thinking, art process is a process by a being who has consciousness of himself as separate from and higher than nature. He tells us:

We may, however, begin at once by asserting that artistic beauty stands higher than nature. For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born—born again, that is of the mind; and as much as the mind and its products are higher than nature and its appearances, by so much is the beauty of art higher than the beauty of nature.<sup>7</sup>

He also claims that:

Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its greatest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the divine nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind. It is in the works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Dover Publications Inc., 1956, pp. 91-93.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *On Art, Religion and Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1970, p. 29.

## *Towards an Understanding of African art*

intuitions and ideas of their hearts; and fine art is frequently the key—with many nations there is no other—to the understanding of their wisdom and their religion.<sup>8</sup>

Although Hegel has not directly addressed himself to African art, one can validly infer that to him there is no such thing as African art or, if there is, it is of an inferior sort. If art is an expression of a being that is apart and higher than nature it would follow that the African, who has no consciousness of himself as separate and higher than nature, is incapable of artistic creation. Furthermore, since according to Hegel art is the most profound form of self-consciousness, the absence of art in the African world provides him with reason to believe that the African is not fully conscious of himself as human.

Hegel, it must be observed, is not thinking in a cultural vacuum. He is an architect as well as a product of 19th century European culture that is permeated by racism and cultural chauvinism, especially in regard to non-white peoples of the world. Moreover, he is a part of European intellectual culture that is presiding over the dissolution of the union of man and nature. Man is being split from the rest of nature, is posited in opposition to nature and nature is opened for his domination. According to Hegel, as would be the case with many of his contemporaries in Europe, the split is so important that without it the essence of man would be inconceivable. As he tells us, in Africa the split has not taken place, and he gives us no reason to think that it will ever take place. Man's essence in Africa remains undifferentiated from the rest of nature and if one is to speak of man there it can only be in terms of his infancy. That is, man is in the process of becoming man just as one can talk of the primates being on the way to becoming human. But as I have indicated, there is no guarantee that this becoming will ever be consummated. To be sure, Hegel would acknowledge that the African is closer to man than the ape, and hence, would deserve a higher place in the evolutionary process. In recognition of the difference between man and the ape European intellectuals called the African the primitive man. What this primitive man created was, henceforth, referred to as primitive.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Thus, even today we exhibit his creation. In various capitals of the Western countries we have Museums of Primitive Art. If Hegel were alive he would question the wisdom of classifying whatever is in these museums under the category of art. The Western world created a special discipline called anthropology to study the primitive man and his works. Today, ethnology and ethnography are the foreams of this study. Both are at the vanguard of the interpretation of African art as well as other so-called primitive art.

The primitive world, that is, the world of the primitive man, is the world of totemism, magic, sorcery, fetishism, witchcraft, animism, ancestor-worship and of superstition. This world, into which African art has been projected, is a fantastic creation of the Western mind in the attempt to understand itself. History has illustrated the futility of this effort, for the Western mind has only succeeded in misunderstanding itself and also in obscuring the reality of the non-Western world. It is also evident that, today, we have not totally freed ourselves from this mystification. There are those who continue to use the term "primitive" as if it can be salvaged from its past contamination. In his book *Theories of Primitive Religion* Evans-Pritchard tells us:

Some people today find it embarrassing to hear peoples described as primitive or natives, and even more so to hear them spoken of as savages. But I am sometimes obliged to use the designation of my authors, who wrote in the robust language of a time when offense to these peoples they wrote about could scarcely be given, the good time of Victorian prosperity and progress and, one may add, smugness, our pomp of yesterday. But the words are used by me in what Weber calls value-free sense, and as such they are etymologically unobjectionable. In any case, the use of the word "primitive" to describe peoples living in small-scale societies with a simple material culture and lacking literature is too firmly established to be eliminated.<sup>9</sup>

Evans-Pritchard, one of the leading British social anthropologists, is either unaware of or is insensitive to the concern of the people

<sup>9</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 18.

## *Towards an Understanding of African art*

he calls primitive. One cannot simply wish away the negative association the term has had in the past. It still carries the same negativity in the eyes of Africans and in the eyes of other human beings whose humanity has also been degraded. The negativity is not going to disappear by reminding us of the distinction between the etymological use and the chronological use or by declaring that one is going to use it in a value-free sense. Whereas a good number of Western writers on Africa have stopped using the term, many continue to use terms that are equally obnoxious. For example, the term “tribal” that is being used as a substitute by some writers in reference to African art (Biebuyck, Fagg, Read, Bravman)<sup>10</sup> is not as value-free as one would like to think. This term, like the term “primitive”, has no basis in the African conceptual framework of languages and, evidently, in African culture. Consequently, it does not do justice to the African point of view. Such terms as “ethnic,” “native,” “negro,” and “traditional” will not do either. In the case of the latter term, Frank Willet, after dismissing the use of the term “primitive” in the introduction to his book on African art tells us:

The only sensible way to approach foreign art traditions is on their own terms, and so as not to prejudice them we should speak of them by their regions of origin as traditional African, Oceanic or American art. We must say “traditional” for in all these areas of the world the old art forms are changing or have changed and the artists are being drawn into the cosmopolitan world of twentieth century art...<sup>11</sup>

In the survey of Western art books one rarely, if ever, encounters a book on “traditional” or “primitive” art. In this case, are we then to assume that it is only in Africa, America and Oceania that “traditional” or “primitive” art is to be found? Whatever became of Western “traditional” art if, indeed, there was such an art? If such an art did not exist why is it that it is only in the West that it did not exist? Isn't Western art subject

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Biebuyck, *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973; William Fagg, *Tribes and Form in African Art*, New York, Tudor, 1965; Rene Bravman, *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1974; Herbert Read, *The Artist in Tribal Society*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Willet, *African Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 28.

to the law of change as are other arts? On what basis shouldn't one believe that Willet is advocating a segregationist policy in art typology? He appears to undermine his own statement that foreign art traditions should be approached on their own terms. The fact is that the sense of "tradition" that is used in the West in reference to African art has no equivalence in the African conceptual framework. Moreover, this is not simply a semantic issue. There is no reason to believe that the perception of time and the interpretation of change in the West is identical to the perception of time and the interpretation of change in Africa. More specifically, one is dealing with two different philosophies of history. The concept of progress or of evolution that one finds in the 19th century West, and a good part of the 20th century, that allows for the classification of art into "primitive" and "civilized" has no counterpart in African time-consciousness. The African approaches his art in a non-evolutionary or in a non-progressive way. In a similar manner he approaches all non-African art. He may dislike or be indifferent to non-African art but he does not regard it as "primitive." He does not temporalize art or the understanding of art hierarchically. Those who cannot free themselves from an evolutionist conceptual framework cannot hope to grasp the essence of African art.

The objection to some of the concepts used in the West in the effort to understand art should not lead one to conclude that the problem of the understanding of African art can be solved by language therapy alone. The conception of time is a factor to be reckoned with. Time is involved in the perception and understanding of art as it is in every other instance of human perception and understanding. If it is in time that the world is constituted one must return to African time-consciousness to understand African creations. The return is also a return to the African world since time-consciousness itself is constituted in and by the world. The return to the African world cannot, however, be a return to the "primitive" world or the "primitive" perception since this would only perpetuate misconception. It must be a return that takes place outside the primitive-civilized parameters since these parameters are meaningless to the perception and understanding that the Africans have of their world. Furthermore, it cannot be a return of one who is separated

*Towards an Understanding of African art*

from nature or of one who is at odds with nature. It must be a return that cancels out this separation and that approaches man and nature from a unified standpoint. Unity, here, is not that unity that Hegel talks about or the unity that 19th century Europe fashioned for the primitive man. It must be the unity from which man and everything else that is, emerge and dwell. It is a unity that is not primarily an object of thought without necessarily being the negation of thought. It is that which constitutes the ground of thought as well as the object of thought. It is beyond categorial thinking but not divorced from it since it is that which provides the basis of categorial thinking. Ultimately the possibility of the dialogue between man and matter is rooted on this elemental unity. Carving, as is the case with any other art process, is made possible by this unity. Ultimately, it must be understood as a truth-bearing process. What it bears is the truth of man and of matter and also of the unity that makes the truth of each of them evident.

The West has for centuries defined the essence of man in terms of "soul," "mind," "reason" or "spirit" and has for the same period tried to figure out how such a being could interact with matter—a being of an entirely different essence. In other words, the problem has been one of trying to figure out how the invisible interacts with the visible. This problem has no equivalence in African thought. In Africa, there is no attempt to reduce reality into matter or into spirit and there is no attempt to reduce matter into spirit or spirit into matter. Both are viewed as expression of one reality, each in its own way. As reflections of the same reality each mirrors the other just as siblings are mirrors of each other by the virtue of their common parentage. The unity of man and matter, of earth and sky, of man and woman, man and animal, man and bird, light and darkness, life and death, in short, the unity of everything that is, points to the African view of reality. Without taking this unity into consideration, African art and, indeed, all that the African thinks, does and feels is unintelligible. We can talk of various styles and sub-styles, of various functions of African art and of various artists as well as various arts in Africa, but unless this fundamental view of reality is taken into account such a talk is bound to be remote from the essence of African

art. This is not a denial of the heterogeneity of what is. It is simply a recognition of the ontological unity of all that is.

Today, in the West, there are art historians who claim that the major obstacle to the understanding of African art is that there is still a need for more collecting, more classifying and more documentation. Such a need, to be sure, is quite evident. But to argue that once the need is met there will take place a genuine understanding of African art is questionable. The activities of collecting, classifying and documenting may simply indicate that one is seeking some sort of legitimacy in Western scholarship where these activities are highly esteemed. These activities do not penetrate the realm of art. They do not give us a sense of art that a people have. I see an African who has transformed his body into a canvas. How is this transformation possible? What does it mean? What and how does the proliferation of this instance contribute to my understanding of art? I see a Ghanaian woman wearing an *aku-aba*. What does it mean? Do I get into the reality of its essence by discovering that it is a fertility doll? What is the connection between art and fertility? These and other similar questions cannot be answered by more and more collection and classification of African works of art. To collect and classify African works of art one must know what one is collecting and classifying. One must have an understanding of African art. One cannot collect and classify African art without an understanding of African philosophy of art. It is not even clear to what extent African art is collectable. Simply because one comes from a culture in which collecting art is a normal activity it does not necessarily follow that one can go into an entirely different culture and launch a collecting effort without doing an injustice to that culture's art. How are we, for example, to know that what the Westerners take to be art is what Africans take to be art? Who is to answer this question? Is it the Westerners? The Africans? Which Westerners? Which Africans? If this necessitates a consensus who is to determine the consensus? It is not my intention to suggest that every art is monadic or that every art has only an external relation with other arts. And, clearly, I do not want to suggest that this is the ontological status of human cultures. The essence of art is intrinsically bound to the essence of man

## *Towards an Understanding of African art*

and even if it is true that human reality manifests itself heterogeneously it is also true that this heterogeneity remains unified. It must be heterogeneity of the same, otherwise it would be incomprehensible. One would not be able to identify it as human. It is this insight into one and the many that makes the revelation of the essence of African art possible and it is also that which makes the revelation of any other art possible. Without this insight the greatness of art is compromised. The tragedy of Western perspective on African art lies in the lack of this insight. The disparaging of the African art that one finds in this perspective is due to the failure to grasp the essence of art. He who fails to grasp the essence of his own art is not likely to grasp the essence of another's art for art pluralizes itself without annihilating its essence. It is in this sense that it is able to mirror the essence of human reality. It is in the nature of human reality to pluralize itself without abandoning its essential unity.

Westerners cannot take African art seriously without taking Africans seriously. Moreover, the lack of seriousness in either case would mean that the Westerners do not take either their art or themselves seriously. Because of racism and other forms of cultural chauvinism, Westerners have estranged themselves from a genuine appreciation and understanding of African art and, hence, of Africans. Insofar as the essence of African art and of Africans is bound to the essence of Western art and of Westerners, by distorting the essence of African art Westerners have distorted the essence of their own art as well as the essence of their being. To eliminate this distortion it is necessary that Westerners rethink their traditional attitude towards the essence of man. By estranging themselves from the African they have estranged themselves from themselves. What the African is qua human is what the Westerner is qua human. Since art is one of the means of revealing human essence, if the Westerner does not recognize himself in African art there is no reason to believe that he fully recognizes himself. It is not enough that the African explain his art to the Westerner. To fully grasp the essence of African art the Westerner must grasp the essence of his own art. That is, to some degree, the understanding of African art is up to the Westerner. Africans cannot "teach"

African art to Westerners. This is not primarily due to the undeserved arrogance that one finds among most Westerners. It is because, essentially, art cannot be “taught”. In art there is only a communion of human beings—a communion which is, in addition, a communion with everything else that is. Every being has its being in this communion and it is in this context that it becomes intelligible. The primary task of art is to constitute and reveal this communion.

In the art process the African artist approaches himself as the possibility of being and, in the same manner, approaches the material he is working with. He sets aside and transcends the mode of being he happens to embody prior to the artistic creation. Likewise, there is a surmounting of the embodiment of the material prior to creation. A metamorphosis takes place in this joint effort of creation. Being set aside and being transcended belong to the innermost being of all beings. No particular mode of being, including that of man, is indispensable. Each being is a site for the possibility of a diversity of beings. Openness, indeed, may be said to inhabit and constitute the essence of every being. No being truly is. What abides in each being is the possibility of being. This essence of beings, for the most part, remains covered up in the everyday discourse on the nature of beings. It is taken for granted that opaqueness of beings is what is essential in them. It is, for example, this mode of being that leads us to believe that a thing is what it is and that it cannot be other than what it is. The archaeology of what it is as expressed in African art reveals that metamorphosis belongs to the innermost nature of all beings. The fact that beings can be other than what they are is a part of the reality of beings. A tree, for example, does not disclose its essence exclusively in treeness. It can offer its trunk out of which a drum comes into being and the drum can, in turn, offer itself to gods so that it can become the means by which gods reveal themselves to man. Man may, in turn, after shedding his everydayness, be in a position to communicate with gods. In the making of *atumpan* (a Ghanaian drum) the drum-maker undergoes a religious purification and asks the cooperation of the tree spirits before embarking on his task. There is nothing from the science of botany that leads the drum-maker to view the tree as an object of

*Towards an Understanding of African art*

reverence. Botany is transfigured and it is only after this event that the drum-maker (who, in turn, must have undergone changes) can appropriately embark on his task. In the past, what the Westerner regarded as superstition in the African is the recognition on the part of the African that nature is permeated by openness. It was the mistake of believing that the African sought to explain the world through magic. It is the world that explains magic and not *vice versa*. Magic is possible because the world exists in such a way that it has a place for magic. Beings could not embody powers if it were not the case that they are essentially open. The invisible would be incapable of inhabiting the visible if it were not the case that the visible is habitable by the invisible and *vice versa*. Because both the visible and the invisible are open to each other they cannot be understood as opposites. Their being together does not entail a contradiction. Each is a means by which the other is itself and, consequently, by which the other becomes intelligible.

Openness to what is by everything that is is, precisely, what African art teaches us. It is the fundamental task of art to open man to all that is and to open all that is to man. In this way, art opens itself and reveals its nature. By offering himself to art the African artist becomes an embodiment of this openness. In her description of the African carver Trowell notes:

More important than the recognition of the carver's ritualistic approach to his materials and his handling of them is an appreciation of his whole conception of the unity of the spiritual and the physical world. For this we must put on one side our Western picture of each and every individual as a unique personal being encased within the shell of his body, influenced only to a limited degree by communication with other unique personalities, and replace it by the concept of self-hood spilling out into the world beyond the confines of the experiencing body and echoing back again from other selves.<sup>12</sup>

Since what is embodied is openness, embodiment cannot mean enslavement in the body. The human body does not constitute a screen between humanness and the rest of what is. It opens the

<sup>12</sup> Trowell, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

truth of what is and this includes the truth of the being of man. This common truth from which every being derives its truth may be what Mbiti has in mind when he tells us, "We are therefore I am."<sup>13</sup> The "We" refers not only to fellow humans but also to gods, spirits, animals, birds, insects, plants, objects and everything else that is. It includes the living, the dead and those to be born. It is this awareness that prevents man from succumbing to human *hubris* in Africa. Instead of setting man apart from all else that is, African art is a constant reminder that man's home is the home of everything else and it is a home in which man is not dominant. In revealing this home, art exhausts its being. The being of art consists of revelation and revelation itself is the very essence of truth. The artist is a servant of truth and his work is the work of truth. What he produces are not art objects. In being what they are, these products efface themselves so that the truth of what is can come into being. Hence, if Meauze is correct in referring to carving as a dialogue between man and matter, carving must be seen as a truth-bearing process. When viewed this way the essence of carving is inseparable from the essence of dialoguing for dialoguing itself is a truth-bearing process. Moreover, what is true of carving is true of all other art forms. Art is the bearer of truth.

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<sup>13</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Garden City, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970, p. 141.