AFRICAN ART

from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection

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In terms of both size and quality, the Paul and Ruth Tishman collection ranks high among private holdings of African art. For nearly a quarter century Mr. and Mrs. Tishman have acquired works originating from virtually all corners of sub-Saharan Africa. They began their efforts in the late 1950s, a time when the collecting of African art was pursued by only a few. This effort was not, however, their first foray into collecting. In prior years they had established substantial holdings in Pre-Columbian art and modern art. Their interest in African works arose largely out of the exposure given this relatively “new” field by public ethnographic collections in Paris, Brussels, and London.

In a recent interview, Paul Tishman spoke of their first African purchases, both from Benin: an ivory female figure and a bronze helmet mask for the Ododua cult. These two pieces, both widely published, were seen by the collector as “a cautious beginning.” He termed them rather “easy,” and by this he meant that they could be readily appreciated by one inexperienced in African aesthetics. An understanding of the more highly stylized traditions took more time to develop, according to Tishman.

With the Benin works as a point of departure, the Tishmans gradually brought together their present collection. Their choices have often been based on the counsel of two persons, Roy Sieber and especially William Fagg. Indeed, throughout the collection the precisely tuned sensitivities of these scholars are readily apparent. Fagg’s contribution deserves special mention on two counts: one defined by medium (works in ivory), another by geography (those from the Yoruba).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently mounted an exceptionally well-defined display of the Tishman collection, providing a particularly apt occasion to consider these important holdings. Such a task became all the more pleasant in the light of the simultaneous publication of what must be considered as not just a catalogue but rather a major contribution to scholarship in the field of African art history. For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection was compiled and edited by Susan Vogel, Curator of African Art at the Metropolitan and organizer of the exhibit. Vogel went to the sources: seventy-one scholars wrote entries on those pieces that fell within their particular realms of expertise, and in nearly every case their comments were based exclusively on their own field research. Such a comprehensive approach allowed Vogel to add substantially new levels of content to the forms themselves.

The thirteen ivory pieces provide superb examples of major west and central African styles in the medium, and our first
consideration will be those within the Afro-Portuguese tradition. Both Sherbro as well as Benin connections to Portugal appear. The Sherbro trumpet (Fig. 1), emblazoned with the heraldry of Spanish 15th-century royalty, is a prime example of African artistry under European patronage. In his inimitable style, William Fagg has detailed these heraldic allusions, and his ultimate attribution isolates the date of manufacture to a three-year period, between 1497 and 1500 (cat. p. 67). Other Afro-Portuguese pieces of particular interest include two saltcellars, one of Sherbro-Portuguese origin (Fig. 2) and another, though less complete, having perhaps even greater aesthetic impact (Fig. 8): the middle section of a Bini-Portuguese saltcellar whose imagery includes a pair of frontally disposed, naked, winged male figures. Their form suggests an angel that has, in a sense, become Africanized.

One of the better known pieces in the Tishman collection is an ivory object that recently received a substantially expanded attribution. Robin Poynor reports that the Owo-Yoruba ivory figure brandishing a sword (Fig. 4) is a fragment of an udama-lore, the ceremonial sword given to a senior chief by the Olowo, or king of Owo (p. 133). By means of a hypothetical but entirely convincing line drawing Poynor locates the fragment in a reconstruction of the entire sword.

A rather less well-known example of African ivory work is a small, carefully detailed figure of a European that comes from the Attie people of southeastern Ivory Coast (Fig. 5). Kate Ezra provides a brief but perceptive description, one that echoes the aesthetic mixture apparent in the Afro-Portuguese angel of Figure 8: "In a sense it is a double exposure, using imagery drawn from two cultures" (p. 77).

Close to one-fifth of the collection is Yoruba, a density appropriate to these artistically prolific people. Virtually all
6. BOWL. EKITI. YORUBA. NIGERIA. OLOWE OF ISE. WOOD. DIAMETER 33cm.

7. DIVINATION TRAY (OPON IFAYE). YORUBA. POSSIBLY OWOD. NIGERIA. WOOD. DIAMETER 36.1cm.

8. SALTCELLAR (MIDDLE SECTION). BINI-PORTUGUESE. NIGERIA. IVORY. 8.3cm.

9. CROWN. IWERE. EKITI. YORUBA. NIGERIA. CLOTH. BEADS. 63.5cm.
these works stand out as exemplary of either one substyle, one medium, one type, or one particularly ingenious formal solution. A beaded crown (Fig. 9) demonstrates just how elegant these royal images can be: a complex display of human and animal imagery is rendered in a series of precise diamond- and lozenge-shaped motifs, with a fineness of line and control of color (especially strong in the orange-to-red spectrum) suggesting the hand of a master artist.

Two Yoruba works by Olowe of Ise demonstrate the range of one hand: first an unusual bowl of undetermined function (Fig. 6) and the other an intricate group of figures who gather to support a bowl (Fig. 12). The shape of the former, with a miniature inner bowl suspended from one side, seems highly idiosyncratic. Fagg suggests an association with Ifa divination but admits that “this would be a unique contribution to Ifa technology” (p. 102). The work serves as a reminder of the breadth of Yoruba art, complete with myriad local variants and individual formal solutions.

The figural group with bowl is, by contrast, of a much better-known type, although it is by no means a common piece. Here is an early example of Olowe’s hand, one we are particularly fortunate to have, since it can be compared to a later version of the same theme, now in the William Moore collection, which Fagg has described as “one of [Olowe’s] finest and therefore one of the finest works made by the Yoruba in this century.” More than just a trial piece, the Tishman example sheds light on the development of the artist’s hand and eye: here are the preliminary steps toward the more complex solution apparent in the later work.
14. FEMALE FIGURE. BAULE, IVORY COAST. WOOD, BEADS. 43.8 cm.

15. OX MASK (DUGA-BE). BIOJOGO, GUINEA-BISSAU. WOOD, GLASS, FIBER, PAINT. 50.8 cm.
The works by Olowe do not exhaust the wealth of Yoruba material in the Tishman collection; rather, they serve to introduce it. There are a number of pieces that through previous publication have become exemplars of major types of Yoruba art. Included in this group are a subtly modulated divination tray (Fig. 7) and a Gelede mask (Fig. 3) crowned by dramatically entwined snakes attacking a precariously balanced quadruped, now identified by Henry Drewal as a porcupine (p. 94). Both these pieces are well known to connoisseurs of Yoruba art; they have been in the Tishman collection nearly since its inception, and they stand as testimony to the strength of the collection even in its early stages. Two other noteworthy works include an Ekiti housepost (Fig. 10) and an extremely rare and controversial ceramic figure (Fig. 13). The housepost embodies another significant departure from the mainstream of Yoruba art; indeed, Fagg suggests that this work "seemed like a masterly effort by a sculptor of another culture to carve in the Yoruba manner" (p.113). In such a work of art, then, we gain a valuable perspective on an issue critical to the history of African art: the changes—in both form and content—resulting from the blending of styles across ethnic lines.

The ceramic figure introduces even more complex problems. As one of only two such figures known, its attribution can be presented only in the most tentative terms. Fagg’s commentary deserves extensive mention: "It can be stated with the utmost confidence that the piece is genuine, though there is no scientific evidence. There is no suggestion that it is an archaeological piece. Its style is not derived either from other known Yoruba terra-cottas or from OgbonI bronzes, though it is of course related to these; a hypothetical forger would therefore have had to be a major creative artist and not merely a superlative craftsman, like the best forgers" (p. 104).

The artistically rich southern part of the Cameroon-Nigeria border is well represented in the Tishman collection. No less than seven such works appear; they hail from various related groups, including the Ekoi, Elik, Boki, Ejagham, and Akparabong. Two deserve special consideration. The first is a four-faced, skin-covered helmet mask that Keith Nicklin assigns to the hand of Takim Eyuk of Akparabong (cover). Exemplary of a most sophisticated technology, the skin has been applied precisely to the four faces, each of which is further embellished with distinct forehead patterns. As a result, the heads seem to depict four individuals. This treatment raises an important question: are skin-covered heads portraits in a generalized or even in a veristic sense? Perhaps even more true to life is another headdress that Nicklin attributes to the Boki (Fig. 11). In this case, a pair of dramatically upturned horns rise above a single visage. The face, complete with open mouth and inset eyes, has not been covered with skin; instead it has received dark red and yellow pigment. As Nicklin points out, except for the skin, this work has all the attributes of a skin-covered head (p. 168). The very lack of skin covering further distinguishes the form and creates an extraordinarily evocative image.

While Nigeria (and especially the Yoruba) may be the strongest section of the Tishman collection, there certainly are numerous important works from other areas. Two Baule works depict females, one standing (Fig. 14) and the other sitting (Fig. 16). Cool and serene, these figures radiate the composure and balance typical of good Baule art. Susan Vogel herself provides the documentation. She groups the standing figure with a number of works collected in the 1950s for the Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar in Lisbon and on the basis of documen-
tation accompanying these pieces suggests as a provenance (but not necessarily as a place of manufacture) the Ayaou Baule, "a marginal group who live on the extreme western edge of the Baule area bordering on the unrelated Yaure" (p. 73). Vogel places the seated figure into "one of the most prolific Baule workshops of this century," and she lists a half-dozen other published examples from this source. Such precise scholarship sharpens our view of Baule art, and while Vogel argues with reasonable caution that "the question of Baule regional styles is a thorny one" (p. 73), we now come substantially nearer the answers.

A number of significant works from central Africa appear in the collection. First to be considered is a chief's staff in ivory and wood, made by the Kongo people of Zaire (Fig. 17), which Robert Farris Thompson eloquently described as displaying "fundamental symbols of unity, discipline, and tradition" (p. 212). The piece was executed according to time-honored traditions of mixed media: an ivory figure is attached to a wooden staff with a band of probably copper or possibly brass. The interface pattern seen prominently between the knob-like forms on the shaft seems to be echoed in the openwork design of the metal element above.

From a more southern site, namely the Ovimbu of Angola, comes a pipe with a striking female figure carved into its stem (Fig. 19). The woman appears elegant and lean, with legs dramatically attenuated as far as the pipe bowl itself. Marie-Louise Bastin speaks of her as "the nana yakana, a young girl of the royal court who is guardian of the kingdom's sacred fire" (p. 222).

If one work in the Tishman collection were to be singled out for the most evocative characterization of human facial expression, it might well be the wooden statue from the Bafum area of Cameroon (Fig. 18). According to Pierre Harter, it depicts a king who is returning from victory. He sits on a fragment of an animal and holds a sword in his right hand. The aesthetic power of the work comes, however, from two other aspects: the expression on the face of the king and that on the face of the severed head held in the left hand. Here appears a most vivid contrast. The victor bears a wild countenance, one made especially dramatic by a slightly skewed, open-mouthed grin. By contrast, the face of the defeated opponent seems serene, nearly beatific. It, too, assumes a smile, but one of a very different type. Here the suggestion is of a balanced, self-assured man, one who in death attains a contentment that seems to have evaded the victor.  

A final mention should be given to one of the more extreme African zoomorphic masking traditions: a mask depicting an ox, made by the Bidjogo peoples of Guinea-Bissau (Fig. 15). This work departs substantially from the animal abstractions common to other Guinea coast styles; here we have a rather convincing bovine image, one whose role in performance is carefully described and illustrated by Danielle Gallois-Duquette (p. 57).  

This presentation can do little more than indicate the breadth and quality of these remarkable holdings. Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, says in his foreword to the catalogue, "Paul and Ruth Tishman's collection of African art, one of the finest in private hands, reflects these collectors' profound interest and involvement in the study of Africa's rich, complex, and extraordinarily diverse artistic heritage. The Tishmans are impassioned and adventurous collectors whose acquisitive instinct has not waned; theirs is a living collection that they have never ceased to refine."
18. KING RETURNING FROM VICTORY, BAFUM AREA, CAMEROON.
WOOD, HAIR, IVORY, BONE, BEAD, CLOTH. 115.8cm

19. PIPE WITH FEMALE FIGURE, OVIMBUNDU, ANGOLA. WOOD, METAL. 29.2cm.
NEW PUBLICATIONS  
Sweat of the Sun, Tears of the Moon: Gold and Emerald Treasures of Colombia, introduction by Luis Duque Gómez. Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, 1981. 96 pp., 30 b&w & 54 color photos, maps, diagrams, bibliography $10.60 paper.  
Pygmy Drawings by Linda Einfeld. Linda Einfeld Gallery, Chicago, 1980. 16 pp., 18 b&w 1 color photos. $5. FOCS, Notes, on page 36  
1. Both pieces have appeared in all the major Tishman exhibitions and have been published on these occasions as well. For the female figure see Arts et Mots: African Arts et Musées de l'Afrique Noire, Paris, 1966, no 77, Masterpieces of Af- 


3. Sources in notes 4, 5. See also 1: 1 p. 70.  


5. Thanks to the Fogg for printing out this content.  

6. There may well be one additional Benin example in the collection, a figure of a European (no. 56 in the Met-

7. The presentation of material on the individual exhibits is a model of its kind. I would like to extend my congratulations to the author of this essay.  

8. Fouqueins illustrates a mask, part of the Lidotla collection from Abokuma, in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Be-

9. Rosen suggests that the reference is to "Agelob- 


11. I am grateful to Dr. Ekpo Eyo, Director-General, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, for permission to publish some of the materials in this article, in particular Figures 3 and 4. I would also like to acknowledge with appreciation Hermann and Margaret Drew, for many hours of stimulating discussion at a recent meeting in Lagos, and to extend it, and to extend them, all involved, best wishes for the great work in hand.  


13. Since these details are clearly discernible in the illustra-

14. For instance, one group may be distinguished from the other by such features as the sharpness of the nose bridge, the absence of a raised ridge, the general configuration of the mouth, the marked projection of the heel in relation to the ankle, and the absence of a smooth finish, the fine lines making wavy marks of virtually equal length.  

15. Some carvers pride themselves on being able to make figures that have "travelled" to one or another owner. For instance, Grandson Ayo, for instance, claimed to be able to carve eyes in at least twenty different ways.  

16. This case of Ojuide's own dead twin-child (fig. 5). In the case of Ojuide's twin-child's child, too, there was no longer a life, he had himself carved the figures, apparently with his blessing.  

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19. I am grateful to Dr. George Banks for this information.  

20. I am most grateful to William Fagg for bringing the