

# UNEARTHING THE PAST

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THE exceptional popularity of the museums that have so far been built and opened to the public in Nigeria and the clamour for more to be established in provincial centres all over the country can be attributed to an innate sense of tradition in most Nigerians, which has fortunately survived the period when everything even remotely associated with the old customs and religions was being abandoned for the new things and the new ideas brought in from the West.

It is no accident that the museums have so far devoted the bulk of their severely limited exhibition space to the display of works of art at the expense of craft work and technology, since Nigeria is the richest of all the countries in Africa south of the Sahara in the quantity, diversity, and depth in time of her surviving plastic art.

Museums are in a sense a new thing in West Africa, but small and invaluable collections of historical and ritual objects have always been maintained as regalia by emirs and important chiefs with all the jealous care, if not the technical knowledge, of a museum curator.

The first public museums to be opened in Nigeria, those of Jos and Ife, were built to house and to supply research facilities for the study and display of the important archaeological discoveries being made in the Plateau minefield in the north-west.

From the early days of Nigerian tin-mining, which began with the original prospecting trip in 1903, and was already a flourishing industry by 1909, archaeological finds were made in the normal course of excavating the tin-bearing alluvial deposits, most of which are of Quaternary or Recent age. Relics of the Stone Age from the Early Palaeolithic onwards and abundant evidence of the more recent cultures which flourished since the introduction of metallurgy (probably soon after the middle of the first millennium B.C.) were uncovered by mining.

In 1944, while still an administrative officer, I had the good fortune to discover a hitherto unsuspected early Metal Age culture which had produced highly sophisticated terra-cotta sculpture at a period thought, and since proved, to be towards the end of the first millennium B.C. This has been named the Nok Culture after the village where it was first found.

Nigeria had always been most famous in the art world for the wealth and splendour of the court art of Benin, which had been largely scattered among the museums of Europe and America, until the discovery and publication in 1911 by the German archaeologist Leo Frobenius of the terra-cotta sculpture of Ife and the single bronze head said to be of Olokun, the goddess of the sea. The impact of this discovery was not, however, complete until the discovery in 1938 and 1939 of a further 19 bronze heads at Ife. It is really to the interest created by this remarkable find, which unfortunately could not be followed up by archaeological research until 10



the centre of Nigeria, and in and around Ife in the south-west.

years later, that the Antiquities Service owes its existence.

About four years later the Government of Nigeria created the new post of Antiquities Officer, to which Mr. K. C. Murray was appointed, and from this the present organization has developed. The project for a museum at Ife (for which the Carnegie Foundation had made a grant in 1939, though it could not be used because of the intervention of the war) was revived and construction began in 1948, though the building was not finally opened until 1954.

In 1947, I was appointed as an archaeologist to assist Mr. Murray. At a time of acute shortage of building capacity in late 1949, I was assigned the task of building the museum at Jos by direct labour and equipping it as an archaeological research museum.

The opening of this museum in the spring of 1952 awakened very considerable public interest and greatly increased the number of finds to be reported in the course of mining. Many of the 56,000 visitors who came to the museum in its first year (an average of 50,000 throughout its eight years of existence—a satisfactory record for a town of some 44,000 inhabitants) were the workmen actually engaged in excavating the tin ore, on whose vigilance these important chance finds depend. Since these are made in sealed alluvial deposits up to anything between 20 and 42 feet below the present featureless land surface, it is obvious that conventional archaeological methods would be virtually impossible. Finds continue to increase

Native works of art. Left to right: A fine example of the Ife bronzes. The Nok head, made some 2,000 years ago. A bust, 600 years old, excavated at Ife. The Tada bronze.

and the area of these finds to spread radially from Jos, which is the headquarters of the Nigerian mining industry.

After the opening of the two special museums at Jos and Ife, the resources of the Antiquities Service were in 1953 concentrated on the establishment of the Nigerian Museum in Lagos, which was opened in March, 1957. Prominent in the display cases are specimens from a very fine personal collection of some 600 pieces of Nigerian traditional art made by Mr. Murray, which he later presented to the museum.

## NATIONAL MUSEUM

The Nigerian Museum is the national museum of the Federation and contains the main display and reserve collections of traditional art as well as representative archaeological collections from all over Nigeria. It has one of the finest libraries of Nigerian art in the country. The possibility of carrying out much-needed extensions to this museum is now assured by the recent acquisition of an adjacent building site.

The main archaeological collections, however, are concentrated at Jos, where good facilities for archaeological research exist, and which is ideally placed for access to the whole Federation, being the only big town with modern facilities which approximates to the geographical centre of Nigeria.

After a spectacular chance find of seven more bronzes at Ita Yemoo on the outskirts of Ife in November, 1957, and the excavation by the department in the following January of an equally

important collection of terra-cotta sculpture, an archaeologist has been appointed to work permanently at Ife. Fourteen acres of land at Ita Yemoo have been acquired to preserve for gradual excavation an area of the old town that was threatened by building.

Excavations at Igbo Ukwo, near Awka, in the Eastern Region, in the dry season of 1959-60 have produced a wonderful collection of bronze objects, pottery and beadwork, whose study will throw new light on the bronze-casting tradition of the Lower Niger and perhaps even on the art of Ife itself.

But apart from the spectacular finds of Ife, Nok and Igbo a great deal of most valuable archaeological work has been carried out in the Islamic areas of Northern Nigeria and work projected for Bornu Province is expected to contribute significantly to the study of the Chad area, which has been called the "Crossroads of Africa".

The Department of Antiquities is also carrying out a comprehensive survey of the traditional architecture of the whole country and undertaking the restoration and maintenance of historic buildings.

Of the six archaeologists and ethnographers in the department, two are Nigerians, and there are three others in training. The technical staff is at present composed entirely of Nigerians. There is no doubt that under an independent Nigerian Government, the Department of Antiquities will continue to bring enjoyment and appreciation of their own past to the peoples of Nigeria, and to bring to the world at large a wider knowledge of Nigeria's own contribution to the history of mankind.



The Nigerian painter Ben Enwonwu in his studio at Hampstead.

It is no longer a simple matter to write a comprehensive article on any aspect of the art of any part of emergent African states without going into complications. Until early in this century when "African Art" was first recognized in France, and consequently throughout Europe and America, art in Africa had been seen through taking control of art with cheap commercialism because of lack of knowledge of indigenous culture and art on the one hand, and of the growth of self-styled art critics on the other. The important aspect of art in Nigeria today is the trend in the role of art in the community. If art has a social or religious function, then its expressions and style will determine its quality.

Three classes of artists in Nigeria are struggling under economic pressure in a society whose philosophy of life is at present entirely based on the need for material development. First, the old carvers whose traditional religions are dying out. Secondly, the sons of the master craftsmen of the older generation whose religious institutions have been disrupted by western influence and the course of events have had to migrate into large cities like Lagos, Kano, Ibadan, Enugu and Kaduna where they found a ready market for their commercialized mass-produced ebony heads among the traffic of airborne passengers across the Sahara from the West Coast. These craftsmen have no artistic consciousness. All they have inherited from their ancestors is skill and it is with this skill, which lies only in their fingers, that they earn their living. They do not claim to be artists. They just carve and sell for money.

## AFRICAN ART IN DANGER

By **BEN ENWONWU**

The third group of artists comprise the better informed youth whose knowledge about art generally is based on western art has been forced into a new but un-

healthy situation in which it can be viewed objectively only from the angle of the new society under whose wing it is now struggling for existence. Art in Nigeria began to deteriorate as a result of British contact; yet this contact could have saved it from natural decay.

We witness in Nigeria the social elite taking control of art with cheap commercialism because of lack of knowledge of indigenous culture and art on the one hand, and of the growth of self-styled art critics on the other. The important aspect of art in Nigeria today is the trend in the role of art in the community. If art has a social or religious function, then its expressions and style will determine its quality.

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