



**NEGRO ART IN  
BELGIAN CONGO**

by  
**LEON KOCHNITZKY**



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# Negro Art in

# The Belgian Congo

by Leon Kochnitzky

  
IN-F-O-R  
C-O-N-G-O

4th revised edition

Published for  
THE BELGIAN CONGO AND RUANDA-URUNDI  
INFORMATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE  
3, rue Montoyer  
Brussels, Belgium

by the

Belgian Government Information Center

630 Fifth Avenue

New York 20

1 9 5 8



BAKUBA—Raffia fibre cloth; Belgian Congo Royal Museum, TERVUREN.

**A**n African work of art is almost isolated from its cultural background. It has to be considered and studied without the help of little-known African history. The social, economic and religious evolution of the Dark Continent throws little light on the real meaning of such work. The only part of human knowledge to which the art historian can have recourse for information is ethnology. This is the chief reason why the study of African art has, for a whole century, been so strongly linked to this science.

Ethnology and aesthetics do not make a happy marriage. The ethnologist is not concerned with the artistic significance of the objects he examines. He cares nothing for the spirit that pervades the statue or the mask he handles; and he remains indifferent to the feeling that inspired the work. Even the technique and the style employed by the artist are of no interest to him, if they do not allow him to ascertain some purely material facts concerning the evolution of culture or the degree of civilization attained by the craftsman.

And yet, during the whole period of discovery of *Africa Tenebrosa*, it was the ethnologist, and not the art scholar, who was the keeper and often the possessor of the treasures discovered by the explorer. Independent research was out of the question. The art scholar, unaware of the treasures that had perhaps been discarded, was forced to enter the museum of the ethnologist, to accept the latter's indoctrination, his classification — in short, the learned man's opinion.

The author, Léon Kochritzky, studied in his native city, Brussels and in Utrecht. Doctor of Philosophy, University of Bologna, Italy. Received the Prix François Coppée from the Académie Française, 1919. Private secretary to Gabriele d'Annunzio (1919-1920). Published seven volumes of poetry (a French translation of Shakespeare's Sonnets. *Elogies* Bruxelles, e.a.). Editor of *La Revue Musicale*, Paris. Contributed regularly to the *Osservatore Romano* and to *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. Lectured at the Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes, New York. In charge of French section of Belgian program of OWI overseas branch from 1942-1946, under the penname of Girard d'Uccle. In 1951, he made a six-month trip to Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola, visiting for several weeks the Bakuba, Bapende and Batsioko tribes. In 1954, he returned to the Congo and Angola. The same year, his poems, *Elogies Congolaises*, inspired by the way of life of both whites and blacks in Belgian Congo, were given an award by the Académie Française. He spent most of the year 1956 in Ceylon, the Portuguese settlements in India and Pakistan. He is now established in Rome.



Science is not to be blamed for this astounding state of affairs. On the contrary, we must be grateful to these scientists who saved and preserved from destruction the beautiful relics in which we delight. The positivist and materialistic spirit that pervaded the whole European culture of the XIXth century bears the responsibility for this situation. The general theory of evolution, the belief in everlasting progress, had imposed rigid notions concerning the culture of the so-called primitive peoples. As Carter G. Woodson puts it, up to about fifty years ago, the fetish sculptures, ritualistic masks and carvings of the Africans were laughed at as poor efforts compared with modern art, and the early explorers and travellers in Africa considered these images of persons and things as evidence of backwardness. (1)

Nowadays, the art scholar needs more than ever the help of the ethnologist. And the French critic Jean Laude could state in *Cahiers d'Art* (April 1954) that "an aesthetic study of African art must once more be based on the elements gathered by Ethnology."

It must be recognized that the artistic tendencies dominating Europe during the last century share with the scientific authorities the responsibility for the neglect of African art. The efforts towards naturalistic excellence, the desire to come closer to reality and the unceasing fidelity to the Greek canon of art contributed largely in estranging the European artist and the art scholar from the imaginary world of Negro art, where style and symbol were superimposed in the vision of the craftsmen.

A consideration of the European invented word *Fetish*, so often applied to African statues, illustrates this estrangement.

*Fetish* comes from the Portuguese *feitico*, a fabricated object, a fake, equivalent to the Latin adjective *fartitius* the French *factice*, the Italian *fitizio*. It became popular after the publication of De Brosse's essay *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches* (1750). It corresponds to nothing that exists in Africa. In his *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, Littré gives the following definition of a fetish: *idole grossière qu'adorent les Nègres* (a coarse idol adored by the Negroes). Now, we know that an African statuette is not an idol, that it is seldom coarse, and that the Negroes do not adore it.

During the XVIIIth century, the passion for exoticism and the exaltation in literary circles of primitive life, of the *bons sauvages* (the good savages) led to the collecting of curiosities gathered

from remote lands. It was but poor treasure-trove, a sort of bric-à-brac piled up without the slightest discrimination. But the collector's approach was pure, not inspired by a mere desire for information or classification. He aimed at spiritual enjoyment alone. This enjoyment did not spring, as ours does, from the contemplation of a beautiful thing: it proceeded rather from the activity of the imagination, deeply moved at the aspect of an exotic object which acted as a vehicle for flights of fantasy.

Before what we would call the "ethnological age" had to an end, a certain revival of this taste for exoticism was noticeable in many European countries. The big "world-fairs" characteristic of XIXth century aspirations, displayed huge geographical models in which African arts and crafts, statues and objects found their place. Objects from the Congo were shown for the first time at the International Exhibition of Antwerp in 1835, others, three years later, at the Exhibition of Brussels. The castle of Tervuren, eight miles from the Belgian capital, the wonderful park surrounding the castle were given up to the Congo Exhibition. Negro villages were built in the park, and products and objects grouped in the building later formed the nucleus of the Congo Museum collections.

The American scholar Robert J. Goldwater, in his fine book *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (2) has studied the development of the more human understanding of the primitive people's aesthetic values. The scientist, layman, amateur and collector have participated in this evolution, in which explorers and travellers, colonial, military and civil servants likewise played parts. At the turn of the century, there was considerable change in the ideas of both learned and ignorant alike on the subject of the "Negro fetish."

Suddenly, this evolution was followed by an outburst of enthusiasm, that, in reality, could almost be called a revolution in the appreciation of plastic art. This was in 1905. The artists discovered this unexpected discovery of African "things of beauty" were a few young painters living in Paris, and some of their friends, poets and critics.

Today, as James Johnson Sweeney put it, African Negro art is no longer represents the mere untutored fumbings of the savage. Nor, on the other hand, do its picturesque or exotic character blind us any longer to its essential plastic seriousness, meaning



dramatic qualities, eminent craftsmanship and sensibility to material, as well as to the relationship of material with form and expression.<sup>(3)</sup>

It was very much in the spirit of negation so characteristic of our days, to state that African art had no impact on Western civilization for the simple reason that it did not exist, and that both artists and critics mistook their own psychic and sentimental representation of Negro objects for a non-existent African Negro Art. On strictly pragmatic ground, this is pure nonsense. During the past forty years, Negro art has brought about one of the most fruitful and representative artistic trends of our age.<sup>(4)</sup>

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African history is little known; it lacks the continuity and the synchronism that enable us to get the full perspective that we possess of so many ancient civilizations, e.g. the Chinese, the Byzantine and the Inca. But every Mediterranean civilization, at a certain epoch, has endeavored to solve the African mystery. The history of the Nasamonian youths, related by Herodotus (II,32) assumes a symbolic significance. This is how Rawlinson translates it: "Some wild young men, the sons of certain chiefs, when they came to man's estate, indulged in all manner of extravagancies and, among other things, drew lots for five of their number to go and explore the desert places of Lybia and try if they could not penetrate further than any had done previously . . ." The Nasamonian youths, after crossing deserts and swamps for days and days, "were seized by some dwarfish men who led them across extensive marshes, until they finally came to a town, where all men were black-complexioned. A great river flowed by the town, running from West to East . . ."

Whether the river flowing from West to East was the Niger cannot be historically proved, although it seems very probable.

In the VIth century B.C., the Carthaginian fleet, commanded by Hanno, swept along the African coast, probably as far as the island of Fernando Po.

Charles de la Roncière in his splendid *Découverte de l'Afrique au Moyen-Age*<sup>(5)</sup>, tells us how the first information on the great African empires came down to us through the works of Arabic geographers.

Ghana, Manding, Songhai, Mossi and Afno developed considerable power in the Nigerian and Sudanese areas: some of them established dynasties that lasted for many centuries. These African empires can be located on the planispheres and portulans designed by the Jews of Majorca in the XIIIth and XIVth centuries. These cartographers never lost contact with the Jewish communities of Southern Morocco, of the Saharian oasis and the Sudan. Their works, unlike those of the Arabic writers, were not of political or religious inspiration: they were maps and guide-books for the use of caravans and merchants.<sup>(6)</sup> Jaffuda and Abraham Cresques (d.1387) were among the most famous Majorcan cartographers. The latter was given by the Infante of Aragon the title of *Magister Mappamundarum et Buxolarum*, or master of maps and compasses. Later, another member of the Cresques family was baptized and assumed the name of Gabriel Valsecha. In 1439, he designed the famous planisphere that came into the possession of Amerigo Vespucci, and which now belongs to the Institute of Catalan Studies in Barcelona.<sup>(7)</sup>

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The trend of discoveries that led to the new world and to the reconnoitering of the African coasts started from Portugal. The impulse was given by the princes of the Aviz dynasty, above all by the Infante Dom Enrique, surnamed the Navigator.

During the whole of the XVth century, year after year, the world unfolded its mysteries in the wake of Portuguese vessels.

Madeira was discovered in 1419, the Azores in 1432, Cape Bojador in 1434, Senegambia and Cape Verde in 1445; the coast of Guinea and the isles of St. Thomas and Principe were first sighted in 1470.

Spaniards and Flemings vied with the Portuguese in the pursuit of new lands. From 1466, a numerous Flemish colony was established in the Azores.<sup>(8)</sup>

In 1479 a citizen of Tournai (Hainaut), Eustache de la Fosse, embarked in Cadiz on the Spanish caravella *Mondadina*. The Spanish kings were at war with Portugal. *Et la nuit des Roys, voici quatre nauires portugaloises quy vindrent descharger leur artillerie sur moy, par telle fachon qu'ilz nous subjuguèrent . . . je fus mis en la nauire d'ung nommé DIOGO CAN, quy estoit un*