African Art
from the
Victor DuBois Estate

The Amistad Research Center
at
Tulane University
New Orleans, Louisiana
African Art from the Victor DuBois Estate given to The Amistad Research Center
By Dr. Maude S. Wahlman & Dr. James H. Olander

The Amistad Research Center has been given 80 works of African art by the estate of the late Dr. Victor DuBois, New York City. This research collection was part of the larger Victor DuBois Collection of African Art, which numbered over 400 pieces at Dr. DuBois’s death. Other examples from that collection were exhibited at the California Institute of Technology (1975), The Kresge Art Center Gallery at Michigan State University (1978), and The Colby College Art Gallery (1980).

The DuBois gift is important because the art is well documented. Most collections of African art are put together by collectors who purchase from galleries or from “runners”– Africans who travel between Africa and the U.S. and specialize in selling African art to galleries, museums, and collectors. Victor DuBois, however, put his collection together while living in Africa, first as a graduate student writing a dissertation, and for thirteen years as a scholar in association with the American Universities Field Staff, a research organization supported by a consortium of 12 universities and the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations. Much of Dr. DuBois’s work in Africa took him to remote areas (mostly in West Africa) where the art was made, used, and (frequently) discarded after use. This direct contact with the artists enabled him to obtain many pieces that would otherwise have succumbed to termites, or to the hot, wet, and dry climatic conditions.

Most of the DuBois collection was annotated by Dr. DuBois himself, by asking questions of the people who made or used the art they gave or sold to him. As a scholar, Dr. DuBois realized the importance of obtaining aesthetic and ethnographic information from the African peoples who used the art as well as from local scholars and collectors.

Years later, after he returned permanently to the United States, Victor DuBois asked Maude Wahlman to further note his collection. However, many of the pieces in the DuBois collection were so unusual that nothing similar was represented in his art books. So they began a lengthy correspondence with scholars of African art who had done fieldwork in particular areas of Africa and might recognize unusual pieces. These friends came through with a wealth of information previously unpublished. Their contributions are included in the two major catalogues for which Dr. Wahlman wrote the texts: Ceremonial Art of West Africa, with a forward by Roy Sieber (Kresge Art Center Gallery, Michigan State University, 1979); and

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Traditional Art of West Africa, with an introduction by Robert Plant Armstrong (Colby College Art Gallery, Waterville, Maine, 1980). Both publications include numerous footnotes and an extensive bibliography for those interested in more information on African arts.

After Dr. DuBois’s death, Dr. James Olander, Victor’s good friend and the executor of the DuBois estate, carried out Victor’s wishes for the collection. Many pieces in the collection were specifically willed to various individuals. Several of these bequests were later purchased by Dr. Stan Appleton and are now located at the Appleton Cultural Center Museum in Ocala, Florida.

Dr. Olander divided the art not bequeathed into two collections. A teaching collection was donated to The Art Department at the University of Central Florida, and a research collection was given to The Amistad Research Center. Dr. DuBois had communicated his interest in these two institutions to Dr. Olander who followed through by also donating Dr. DuBois’s papers and books to Amistad and his African art books to the University of Central Florida.

The Amistad Research Center’s portion of the DuBois collection of African art contains some rare and unusual examples of traditional as well as contemporary African art. One spectacular piece is a large (56") Mossi mask from Burkino Faso (Fig. 1) carved from one piece of wood. The face is simple with a notched ridge from bottom to top, ending in a pair of antlers or horns. There are geometric carvings on the sides of the head. The tall projection of the mask, the backboard, is embellished with carved geometric designs decorated with white paint and open spaces. It was probably used by the Wango Society in initiations, funerals, and harvest
A Senufo heddle pulley (Fig. 3), carved in the shape of an elephant's head, is from the Ivory Coast and was once part of a narrow men's loom. This wooden heddle pulley, which is painted black, once held the threads used in creating designs while weaving.

Equally spectacular are three Dogon houseposts from Mali (97\text{\textfrac{1}{4}}\text{in} high) decorated with carved figures, fish, and lizards. These posts were used to support roof beams in shrine buildings.

Small pieces are also very important. A lock made by the Bamana people (Fig. 2) from Mali, was used to protect their graneries. Although made of wood, and easily breakable, the lock protects because it is carved in the shape of a female ancestor. When ancestral powers are thought to affect people's lives, then images of ancestors can protect the harvests. Locks are made with two parts: this is the vertical decorated section. The female figure is carved with a textured body, cone shaped breasts, square hips, no arms, a crescent shaped hairstyle, and an umbilical hernia. There are two strings of beads around the neck and two around the waist. The second section was a movable horizontal piece which may have been carved to represent arms.

The Amistad collection also contains four standing Boule figures (See cover.) carved to emphasize beautiful bodily features because they often represent spirit lovers. The female has scarifications on her forehead, chest, belly, shoulders, and back. Her coiffure is incised. She wears a strand of white beads around her neck and another of mostly maroon beads around her waist to hold her loincloth. The arms are carved free but her hands touch her waist. She stands on a small block. Some of the original black stain remains.

Two of the smallest pieces in the Amistad gift are Asante gold weights (Fig. 5) in the shape of a crocodile and of a swordfish. These weights, made of bronze, were used by the Asante to measure gold dust on a balancing scale. The Asantes's imagination was vivid, and weights were cast in many different shapes of animals, fish, birds, people, and objects from daily life.
From the Mun people, a large cast-bronze pot with cover is a good example of anthropomorphism (Fig. 5). Three naked humanoid figures support the pot, the sides of which are decorated with two rows of similar figures. A single figure forms the handle of the cover. Tamara Northern (in a private letter) says this is a bronze working of an "Afro-Portuguese" salt cellar or vessel and may come from Fumban, Bamun.

A research collection such as this provides valuable opportunities for analyzing details of style—the style of one culture compared to another, and the style of one carver versus another within a culture. One can also study differences between early, traditional African arts and later contemporary examples. The Amistad gift contains some contemporary African arts. Contrary to public belief, traditional African art has not "died" or degraded into only "Airport art," but continues even with new patrons.

In the Amistad gift one finds a wide range of art styles in various African civilizations. Most art is made by artisans who undergo lengthy apprenticeships with master carvers, weavers, or priests. Some art is made for utilitarian use (huddle pulley, cloth) but many arts have religious significance and thus represent the deepest and oldest values in a culture.

One cannot easily recognize the Africanisms in contemporary Afro-Latin American and Afro-American arts without a thorough knowledge of African arts and religions. Although African ideas continued and evolved, the forms which incorporated these ideas often changed as Africans strove to maintain their cultural values in new environments. The DuBois collection, a source of information and renewal, now serves, in its several new homes, as a memorial to the man who assembled it with aesthetic sensitivity and scholarly knowledge.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


