

Ladislav Segy, New York

THE ARTISTIC QUALITY OF AFRICAN SCULPTURE

Nearly three decades' experience in African art has shown this writer that the question of determining the artistic quality of an African sculpture is often ambiguous, not only for the general public, but for many collectors. While rarity may at times be preferred to artistic merit, most frequently, the age or antiquity of the sculpture becomes the determining factor.

The word, antiquity, generally refers to art works of great age. By extension it may refer, however, to an art work executed in a bygone style. The first definition may apply to some definite historic period, and in this manner we identify an art work of the Egyptian, Greek or Romanesque periods. If we use the second extended meaning, we may again by common usage, refer to an art object executed in a style no longer practiced, although no historic time is indicated, since frequently such time cannot be ascertained.

In order to clarify whether the consideration of age in terms of historic time can be applied to African art, we first propose to investigate whether the age of an African carving can be determined.

To this effect, we shall consider under the heading, BACKGROUND, all available documentation about the historic and ethnic background of a carving and through elimination come to our conclusions.

We shall study whether the physical conditions of the carving, its appearance, or the analysis of the material itself is of help in determining its age.

Our last inquiry will be whether from an aesthetic point of view the question of the antiquity of an African carving — if it can be ascertained — is an important consideration. Ultimately, we shall advance our suggestions which may help in judging the artistic quality of an African carving.

BACKGROUND

The available documentation of the history and customs of the African people in which sculptures have been mentioned, can be grouped accordingly:

1. The earliest written documents, assembled by Arabic chronicles.
2. Documents written by Europeans from the 15th to the 18th century.
3. 19th century reports of explorers and travellers.
4. 20th century scientific documentation, including archaeological discoveries.
5. African indigenous documentation.

1. The earliest information about West Africa and mainly about the countries of the Sudanese Plains stems from Arabic writers. From the 9th century (Yakoubi) up to the 11th century, we have documents either of geographical description or compilations of reports of travellers and traders, recorded in chronicles, the writers