

Creative Living

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African art: beautiful, functional imaginative

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

The African Art show at Donald Morris Gallery of Birmingham gives the public another opportunity to absorb the wonders of primitive works.

It complements "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" at Detroit Institute of Arts. The Morris Gallery show, however, is primarily African with a few Oceanic and Eskimo pieces included. It grew from a few highly select pieces in the initial concept to more than 130 of outstanding quality.

Morris, a recognized authority on African art, said, "The first pieces entered European collections in the 16th century, not as art, but as souvenirs . . . the first serious collecting started in the 1920s in Paris."

All of these pieces were originally functional, either social or religious and all were an integral part of the life of the people of the tribe.

Many, such as the wonderful Fang mask from Gabon, show where the wearer grabbed and held on to it. This mask also has faint remnants of the white paint applied over red.

THE BEAUTY of this one in particular is in the powerful abstract qualities that have a haunting beauty that transcends time and place.

These same wonderful abstract qualities are present in many works in the show such as a Pende sickness mask from Zaire, the four Chi-waras, Bambara, Mali, worn at planting time to inspire a good harvest, the Babio masks from Eastern Nigeria, with their exaggerated features combining man and bird images, the loon pullys, the executioner's knife, throwing knives and the wonderful ceremonial staffs.

Because function inspired art, the pieces meant to be used, handled and worn, have an incredible balance of both mass and design, to be-

come an extension of the body and the spirit.

The tribal and household shrine figures often have more detail and convey the ideal of beauty in the minds of the people. Some, depending on the tribe, include the scarification.

Since they had supernatural powers, there are elements of the real and the spirit world in these, but always there is, as Morris said, "irreducible balance of masses . . . clarity and structure."

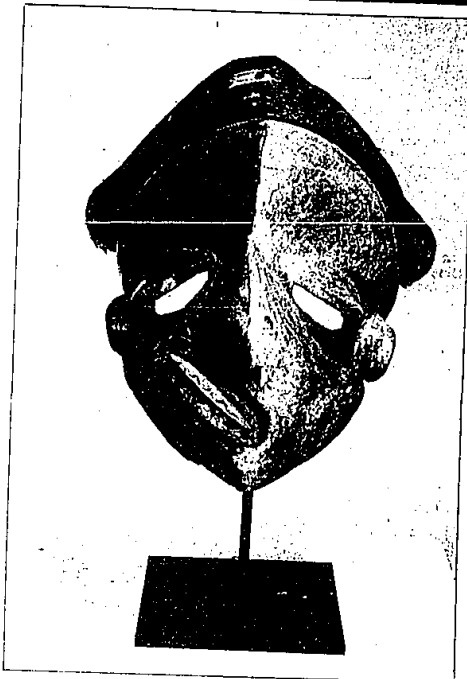
In all African societies, except the Bundu (a society of women) of the Mende people of Sierra Leone, only the men wore the masks.

THE TWO, dark wood, dome-shaped Bundu masks in the Morris Gallery show, which fit over the entire head, are elegant in concept and somewhat subtle in design. The width where the neck and shoulders meet suggests rolls of fat and the appreciation which these people had for corpulent women.

While it is difficult to single out spectacular pieces in this show, certainly the Kongo nail fetish figure from Zaire, the Ekimo spirit mask and the Chokwe mask, Angola, are among the most moving. Every time the nail figure was used, another nail was driven in and these become a documentation in themselves. Many are hand-forged, square nails, others are pre-revolutionary star headed nails and a lot date to later periods.

The rare, wood Ekimo spirit mask is beautiful in concept and delicate in balance. It was to affect the Ekimo's lifeline — hunting.

The central image, a face placed in the center of the hollowed-out back of a duck, is enclosed in a circle. Extending out from the body of the bird, and beyond the circle, are four pairs of tools which were probably used in hunting and preparing food.



The sickness mask (above), Pende, Zaire, vividly expresses a painful condition. The chi-wara, Bambara, Guinea, (above, right) illustrates the brilliant way these people handled volume, line and form. At far right, is a mask, Fang, Gabon, with haunting, abstract qualities. At one time the Fang mask was white with red underneath, now all but worn away. At immediate right is carved wooden figure, Baga, Guinea, which played a major role in the well-being of the tribe.



THE SCARIFICATION on the Chokwe mask with hair of mud and raffia, symbolizes the belief of the people, that life is divided into four parts, the final one being after death, when the spirit crosses a river to another existence.

African art deals with the basic elements of life — well-being, love, fear, illness, death, afterlife, happiness and procreation. While it may have had an influence on modern Western art, it is a blessing that it

wasn't reciprocal — at least for a period of time.

For, as we have learned, from the Ekimo and others who now produce for the mass market, the power, emotion and raw beauty of the pure form disappears as quickly as the snows of April, once the outside world enters in.

The show continues through April. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 105 Townsend, Birmingham

Staff photos by Jerry Zolynsky

Jewelry — the importance of interaction

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

William Harper's jewelry on exhibit at Yaw Gallery through April 10 straddles time and space and craves the bonds which separate painting and sculpture.

"When people say 'what are you?', I say I'm an artist," Harper said.

As such he seems to draw from a primal consciousness to create works that have associations with many cultures and religions and yet remain distinctly his.

"I never design pieces ahead of time — I have a tendency to make stuff and move it around. They just spring forth."

Harper, who likens his work to amulets, talismans and fetishes, credits Kenneth Bates, whom he studied with at Cleveland Institute of Art, with helping him find this medium for his creative energy.

He had a faculty for working on a small scale without things feeling small. I thought I would end up a painter. I like to work clean — I don't like to get technically involved. I'm really a painter. I guess I think of myself as an assemblagist."

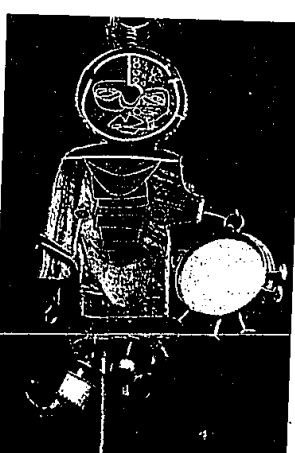
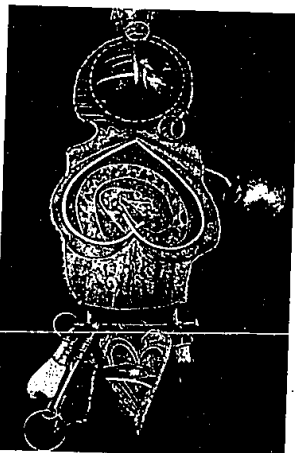
That latter term helps describe Harper's work. Each necklace, stick pin or brooch is a combination of many elements — beautiful enamel on copper cloisonne, gold, sterling silver, pearls, semiprecious stones, glass, teeth, shell and more. Some are largely abstract, but in the Yaw Gallery show, Harper is showing pieces from his "Saints, Martyrs and Savages" series.

There is an unforgettable intensity about these with their multi-level appeal — intellectual, emotional and aesthetic. The colors and designs carry messages from ancient societies to the present day.

Harper expresses basic, primal feelings of savagery, wonder and mystery and never lets the slick overlay of modern life slip into his work.

These figures of saints retain remnants of ritualistic practices which continued to have a strong influence on life in the Middle Ages.

St. Sebastian with the body pierced by pieces of metal (gold) and glass is related to the Kongo nail



At left is St. Valentine with his heart upside down. He is a combination of gold and silver cloisonne enamel on copper, silver, gold, ivory and other materials. St. Aborigine (at right) is also gold and silver

cloisonne enamel on copper, but he has some different elements, claw, bone and mirror. The figures are between six and seven inches long.



William Harper considers himself a painter and assemblagist. He likes to encourage a kind of intimacy between his art and the people who see and enjoy it.