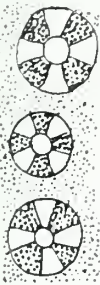


Miscellaneous

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPE ON EARLY BENIN ART BY W. GASKELL

ROMANESQUE, Merovingian, Gothic, early German, Indian, Spanish—under these various *aliases* certain elaborately carved pieces of ivory, chiefly cups and hunting horns, have, for lack of sufficient data, imposed for a long time back on the curators of most of the European museums, and thereby obtained houseroom on false pretences so to speak. Now, however, according to Professor Von Luschan, the great German ethnologist, the origin of all these masqueraders can be traced to one source; for after carefully comparing them with authenticated specimens of ivory carving brought from Benin city after its sack in 1897 by the British Punitive Expedition, under Admiral Sir Harry Rawson, K.C.B., he has given it as his opinion that that city, or its immediate neighbourhood, may confidently be accepted as their birthplace, while their parentage is undoubtedly mixed, since they were made by the Bini for the special use and under the personal direction of the Portuguese adventurers of the sixteenth century. These adventurers were, in many cases, knights of the military order of Christ and St. James, one of the most important colonising agencies of that epoch, whose badge, a Maltese cross, occurs on some of the finest hunting horns of the above description in conjunction with the arms of Portugal and the Armillary Sphere, which appears on the coins of that country during the sixteenth century, and has since been adopted as the Brazilian coat of arms. This Maltese Cross seems to have been worn suspended round the neck in the manner of a pectoral ornament, not only by the kings, but by many of the Benin chiefs, to whom it was probably presented by one of the Portuguese Ambassadors to their city on behalf of his master, with the double significance of a decoration and a badge of Christianity. The only actual native-made cross known is now in the Hamburg Museum, and measures



PUNCHED
BACKGROUND
OF UNUSUAL
DESIGN

5 inches square and $\frac{3}{16}$ inch thick. A curious and significant fact about the early Benin ivories is that some of the large carved tusks intended for religious use by the natives themselves, but executed under Portuguese influence, although they cannot possibly be earlier than the last quarter of the fifteenth century, simulate phases of European art several centuries anterior, so that by comparing the two productions we see the ordinary process of artistic evolution inverted, and get the apparent anachronism of figures and costumes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries represented in the manner of the twelfth century, or earlier.

Since the skill of the Bini in ivory carving—an art which they practised in common with other Yoruban



EUROPEAN CLEAN-SHAVEN SOLDIER ARMED WITH
MATCHLOCK. MATCH WOUND ROUND WRIST

tribes—was such that their work in this material was able to establish a successful claim to the various titles already enumerated, with the full sanction of the best European archaeologists, one wonders how these



BEARDED EUROPEAN TRADER WITH RANSEMI
AND STRAIGHT SWORD WITH QUILLONS

same experts would have classified certain of the extraordinary bronzes of similar date which came to Europe in 1897 for the first time, and are purely native in treatment, and distinctly peculiar to Benin itself: such as the really exquisite head of a negress in bronze, which, for accuracy of modelling, delicacy of finish, and fineness of patina, might well belong to the best period either of Classical or Renaissance art: and certain vessels or covers, presumably made from the design of some unknown milled fruit, not unlike a cocoa pod, which might also belong to either of the above periods.

The small triangular bronze bells, also much affected by the natives, and in the manufacture of which they displayed the greatest ingenuity—as one hardly sees two examples alike—might belong to almost any nationality or period, but more especially to the early Celtic. Then there is an elaborately chased turban-shaped object, probably intended as a stand for one of the carved tusks, which is almost purely Sarcenic both in its graceful spiral design and its decoration: while the elaborately punched backgrounds on nearly all the plaques, one of which, Von Luschan says a

German metal worker told him, would take several months to execute, closely resemble the twisted patterns on the 13th plaster fronts of one early Italian Cassino. There is a similar design on the costume of a metal 13th figure of Hispano-Arabish manufacture of the twelfth century in the South Kensington Museum. The bronze castings were nearly all made under European influence, like the many carvings, but, unlike them, were destined solely for native use in the temples, or else were commissioned and executed for reigning Benin monarchs, and buried with them at their decease: hence their wonderful preservation, and the fact that they did not appear in Europe until brought there as loot from Benin after its sack.

While the artistic merit of both the bronzes and bronzes is considerable, their ethnographical interest is almost inestimable, and they are both surrounded by a halo of mystery as to how and why they were fashioned, and to what varied influences they owe the suggestions which they present of nearly every conceivable phase and style of early European and Eastern art. The date of the beginning of intercourse between Benin and Portugal, the date and manner of the acquisition of the art of bronze casting by the Benin, and of the rise and fall of Benin art in general are all verified from four different sources, viz. the



AFRICAN WOMAN WITH MOUNTAIN-SHAPED HEADRESS, ARMED
WITH RANSEMI AND STRAIGHT SWORD, CROSS PATTERN
PUNCHED BACKGROUND, WITH CATFISH IN CORNER

traditions of the Ben themselves, as collected by Sir Ralph Moore and Mr. Loftus Russell, and forwarded to our Foreign Office in 1897: the independent testimony of the various European adventurers

The Influence of Europe on Early Benin Art

who visited the city from the end of the fifteenth century onwards; the style and fashion of the different European weapons, costumes, and ornaments depicted on the bronzes; and the analysis of the metal itself. According to the Court historians, Jujumen and master craftsmen, Esige the tenth king of Benin in his old age declared that he was born a white man (which, if not a mere figure of speech, would seem to indicate that he was the child of a native princess by her alliance with some adventurous European or Arab trader), and expressed a desire to see white men once more before he died. Accordingly, he sent messengers to the coast, some seventy miles distant, with tusks and other presents, to try and induce some of the Europeans who came there periodically for the purpose of trading to take up their abode at Benin city with a similar object. This mission was apparently quite successful, as we next hear of one of Esige's chiefs, Inoyen, going to the white men's country, and after a prolonged sojourn there, taking back with him gifts and friendly greetings to his



EUROPEAN SOLDIER ARMED WITH CROSSBOW AND THREE DIFFERENT BOLTS, WITH CRICK IN GIRDLE AT SIDE

master from their king; he is probably the ambassador mentioned by D'Aveiro as returning with him to Portugal. Among the white men who

returned with Esige's first messengers to the coast was a certain Ahammangiwa, who made brass work and plaques for the king, and apparently remained long enough in Benin to found a school and instruct a number of boys in his own art, and it was by him and his immediate pupils that the best of the bronzes were probably executed. "Esige's son, Osogboa," according to the same narrators, "made war on the King of Egbon, and took him and his people prisoners to Benin, where he asked Ahammangiwa and his boys if they could put them into brass, and they said, 'We can try,' and so they did, and these are they. Then the king nailed the panels to the walls of his house; but now Ahammangiwa and his boys are dead, and we can make no more brass work like they did." At the same time, this West African Cellini made portrait panels of white men, friends of himself and the king.

Although there is no definite information concerning the identity of the legendary Ahammangiwa except what I have already quoted, still, on examining the bronze head of a negress (already mentioned) in the British Museum and the four panels, also there, with a cross inside a circle punched on the background, instead of the usual quatrefoil pattern, and which totally differ both in feeling and execution from all the other Benin bronzes, one wonders whether these, and perhaps the spiral turban-shaped stand now at Berlin, are not the actual work of this fabled European artificer; and, if so, whether he may not have been either a lay brother of one of the religious fraternities to whose persistent efforts the spread of civilization at that period was mainly due, or else a skilled metal worker especially sent by the Portuguese to instruct the Bini in his art, with a view to creating a market for Portuguese bronze, either in the form of ingots or manils, and generally to promote trading relations. It seems impossible, in the face of the art objects just mentioned, to accept the theory that this instructor was a mere ship's armourer, as has been



EUROPEAN CLEAN-SHAVEN SOLDIER

suggested; if he were a ship's armourer, then he must have been an exceptionally gifted one, since both his technical and artistic skill is of the highest order.

Now for the evidence of the Europeans themselves.



HEAD OF BEARDED EUROPEAN TRADER IN POT HAT, WITH CONVENTIONALISED RING MONEY IN CORNERS OF PANEL

Although the inhabitants of Benin and its neighbourhood had been in almost constant commercial relationship with Europe since the end of the fifteenth century, and indirectly by means of the caravans trading across the desert for many centuries previous, as is proved by the records of the early Arabian historians, and illustrated in an interesting manner by the recent discovery in Ashanti of a large cast bronze jug (now in the British Museum) of English manufacture of about the year 1400, or nearly a century before the first recorded European expedition to the Guinea Coast, and which must therefore have journeyed across the entire distance of the African continent, still the first authenticated visitors to the Gulf of Benin were some Portuguese sea captains in 1470 (the claim of the Genoese, and Normans of Dieppe, to have reached the Guinea Coast in the thirteenth century being of the most shadowy description), while the earliest recorded mission to Benin city was that under D'Aveiro in 1486, already alluded to. The next important expedition was that of Windham and Pinteado, about seventy years later, in 1553, who reported that the then king of Benin had been brought up to speak Portuguese from his youth, which description would most aptly apply to Esigé's son, Osogboa.

The analysis made by Mr. William Gowland of the actual bronze from which the various objects of art were cast shows that it probably came from the

Iberian Peninsula, and was not tough enough for the manufacture of guns or wire, while too brittle for domestic utensils to have been hammered out from it. It was probably, therefore, imported by the Portuguese for the express purpose of being cast into works of art, and most likely came in the form of the manilios or ring money, representations of which figure largely on many of the panels; for, according to Windham and Pinteado, the Portuguese imported to Benin "manils of brass and some of lead, horse-tails, kettles of Dutchland with brazen handles, swords, daggers, cloaks, hats, hawk bells, large pins, unwrought iron and coral," taking in return principally pepper and elephants' tusks. These expeditions were all armed with harquebuses, pikes, long bows, cross bows, and partisans, all of which, both imports and equipments, are reproduced in the Benin ivories and bronzes of the period.

I now come to the most convincing, and, at the same time, most interesting evidence — the weapons, garments, and ornaments of the Europeans who visited the city, either as traders, ambassadors, or missionaries; for, from the realistic style in which all the finest bronzes are executed, there can be no doubt that none but individuals actually living were depicted, and that the minutest details of their dress and weapons were carefully and truthfully carried out, so that the period of these once arrived at we have the exact date of the bronzes themselves. From all this evidence it is almost certain that prior to the discovery of Benin by the Portuguese the art of casting bronze by the *cire-perdue* process was



EUROPEAN OFFICER IN MORION, WEARING HOOD, WITH MATCHLOCK-GUN HUNTING WITH DOG

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unknown to its inhabitants, for by no other method could such elaborate and complicated designs have been executed; some of them, indeed, being well able to hold their own for freedom of design and successful mastery of the most difficult technical details, with the best works of the European renaissance, with which period they are practically coeval. The same evidence shows us that art generally was at its best in Benin from about 1530 to 1670, during which period that city was on terms of friendly equality with Portugal, from which date onward it rapidly deteriorated, as the relations between themselves and civilised countries grew less frequent. In spite of this, we have so far discovered no examples by which the gradual development among the Bini of the art of casting bronze can be traced, for it is almost incredible that any people, however skilful naturally, could have acquired the almost too facile dexterity which is apparent in some of the early Benin specimens without a far longer period of apprenticeship than the comparatively short time which must have elapsed between the advent of the Portuguese and the production of the finest bronzes. It seems to me that the best way to account for that absence of all early and imperfect pieces and of all masters'

models—an absence which conveys the impression that the Bini artificers sprang, Minerva like, fully equipped from the hands of their Portuguese instructors—is by the supposition that, owing to the scarcity and consequent value of the raw bronze, all the inter-

mediate specimens and models which were in any way defective were systematically broken up and re-melted until satisfactory results had been obtained; so that in this manner their footprints, as they advanced, were effaced behind them.

To anyone acquainted with the negro character, this apparent rapidity with which the Bini acquired their artistic proficiency under indifferent European teaching, and lost it again directly they were thrown on their own resources, is not so extraordinary as it appears, for the negro is imitative, versatile, and tractable to a high degree, but absolutely devoid of individual initiative, application, or power of retention, and decidedly, ambition is not one of his strong points.

In conclusion, I must add that I have confined myself almost entirely in this article to the idea suggested by its title, as a description of the bronze tablets themselves and the numerous objects of personal decoration are fully deserving of a special article.



HEAD OF NEGRESS, WITH PECULIAR HEADDRESS IN BRONZE



BRITISH
PUBLIC
LIB.