

THREE ELEMENTS OF AFRICAN CULTURE

(Continued from last issue)

What have the explorers in darkest Africa found to indicate that the Africans loved the beautiful? What have the Africans to show as specimens of fine art? The music of Negro peoples has become proverbial. In so far as song is an expression of aesthetic propensities the African abundantly qualifies as a lover of art. Whether the strength of a Wagner or the melody of a Beethoven; whether the melody of a southern plantation or a concert in Symphony Hall, the principle of the music is the same. The crude instruments of which the explorer tells us are mute testimonials of the African's attempts to express himself in song and music. There were to be found in the Bagandaland, according to Roscoe, drums for dancing and the "royal" drum was elaborately decorated, thus showing a combination of sight and soul appreciation for beauty. He said that the harp and stringed fife were also found in this same tribe. The pottery found in this region was glazed and figures painted thereon indicated beyond doubt artistic design of no mean order. The basketry had various figures worked through the skillful manipulation of the bark figures. Roscoe asserts that polychrome paintings were much in evidence among the Baganda tribes and their work in ivory corresponded favorably with the same kind of work found in Europe during the Neolithic age.

Whether fine art is indigenous is not a pertinent question but the significant thing is that Roscoe found these tribes actually giving expression to what seemed to be a well-developed sense of the beautiful.

When Bent reached the ruined city of Simbabwe, he found the natives playing upon one-stringed instruments with gourds as resonators and he avers that the sound was plaintive if not sweet. That a mode of dress is primitive is no proof that it lacks taste and a subtle refinement. This is amply illustrated by the striking beauty of Egyptian costumes which now again grace the modern stage. Though four thousand years have elapsed since Egypt basked in the pristine glory that was hers, we have many evidences that what was pretty then is not ugly now. This is no less true of the remnants of those who saw the sun of glory shine upon Mashonaland. In remarking about their apparel Roscoe is positive in the assertion that "their dress evidences taste when not contaminated with a hybrid civilization." Like the Cretans, they displayed artistic tendencies to the extent the simplest fool bore evidences of ornamentation. If such tendency in the Cretans was indicative of the artistic temperament, a similar tendency in the Africans must be similarly interpreted.

According to Roscoe, definite stages are well defined and can be definitely traced in their paintings. At

first the themes were things and later they were men and the human body as a design for the artist is clearly portrayed. There was a "breast and furrow" type of painting that marked almost every object with which they had to do. The piano with iron keys was very much like such instruments found in Egypt. The Jews' harp was found in many quarters. There can be no doubt that music had its place in the life of the Mashonaland. But music is a fine art and its value lies largely if not wholly in its appeal to our aesthetic natures. What can be the meaning of such evidences of love of music among the African tribes? Can it not be interpreted as their response to the appeal of the beautiful?

Of the great defensive walls of Zimbabwe Bent says: "The fort is a marvel with its tortuous and well-guarded approaches; its walls bristling with monoliths and round towers, its temple decorated with tall weird-looking birds, its huge decorated bowls. The only parallel that I have seen were the long avenues of menhirs near Carnac in Brittany. One cannot fail to recognize the vastness and power of this ancient race, their greatness of constructive ingenuity and their strategic skill." Of course there is evidence that the present inhabitants of those ruined cities were not the tribes that once ruled mightily in these regions. Bent himself holds that such high culture must have come from another people. The very fact that the present population seems far below the level of culture that once prevailed there is the only evidence upon which Bent predicates his argument that another race than the Negroes were the bearers of this great culture. However, it is hardly probable that the level of culture was foreign to the Negroes who lived in the palmy days of Zimbabwe. There must have been an overlapping of cultures even if we grant that another race produced the culture of this region. It is hardly probable that a dominant race would have wholly abdicated in favor of the natives and it is still less probable that the natives could have dislodged a race so strongly fortified. It is highly probable that the same race of people could have produced the peoples who occupied the level of these two very different cultures. No one supposes that the inhabitants of Athens today are equal to the Greeks of the days of Pericles. Yet they are connected with the same great race.

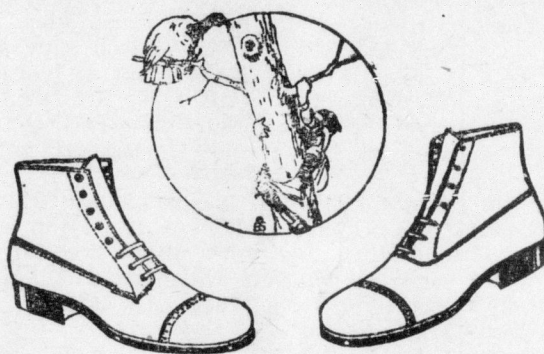
Aside from the ancient walls and temples reputed to be the products of a genius foreign to the tribes of today, Bent comments favorably upon the art such as is the product of the modern inhabitant. With regard to a beautiful bowl he says: "The work displayed in executing these bowls, the careful rounding of edges, the exact execution of the circle, the fine pointed tool marks and the subjects they chose to depict point to a race having been far advanced in artistic skill." Hunting scenes are numerous, and in the processions of men, animals are often put in to make for relief, sometimes a bird is introduced for the same effect. It is quite singular that in one of the hunting scenes the sportsman is a Hottentot. Sculpturing was usually done in soapstone and the bird upon the post is a subject which is frequently depicted.

(To be Continued)

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