

IN CELEBRATION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

AN EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY PHILIP GOULD & LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE/CUNY

FEBRUARY 6 - MARCH 31, 2009

Koma Terra Cotta African Sculptures and Pygmy Bark Paintings



Koma Terra Cotta Sculpture

The history of Koma terra cotta sculpture is short and recent. A series of burial mounds were discovered in Northern Ghana only in 1985. When these mounds were excavated quantities of artifacts were uncovered including many terra cotta figurines, the object of the current exhibition. Little is known about the sculptures and the paucity of research has not added much to our understanding of this “new” African culture which flourished in Komaland between the 13th and 17th centuries. A descriptive analysis, however, may offer some insights.

Most of the objects are fairly small, measuring between 8½ and 24 centimeters. The small objects often depict just the head above a tapered bottom which could act as a stopper or plug for a ceramic jar. The human head is the pervasive subject and is generally treated in a decisive manner with individual features of the face boldly defined: broad noses, thick lips and wide open eyes made more pronounced by the role of clay that traces the curve of the eye. On some examples the facial features are enlarged and compressed; this squeezing together produces an

almost unrecognizable abstract image.

The larger sculptures represent male and female figures usually in sitting positions, adorned with bracelets, armlets, necklaces. Male figures are nude while female figures wear loin cloths. All these figures suggest a regal presence, seated as they are in upright frontal positions. Conjectures have been made as to how to interpret them: village elders, portrait images of departed members or revered ancestors?

WHAT IS REMARKABLE in these sculptures is the latitude enjoyed by different artists in rendering the likenesses



of the human physiognomy. Sometimes the heads are sculpted with considerable detail and thoroughness, at other times the facial features are treated very summarily as two punched holes to indicate the nose or parts left out all together; the intention of the artist is never in doubt.

Two additional characteristics remain to be examined; both are of singular importance. The first is the **OPEN MOUTH**, a feature which occurs over and over again in Koma terra cotta figurines. What can be made of the **OPEN MOUTH**? There are a number of explanations without any one claiming a sure answer. The open mouth may suggest a great wailing at the departure of a family member. Many cultures employ professional criers or mourners, to cry and thrash about at the burial site, a practice which is noted in early Greek art, in European medieval mortuary art and a practice still found today at cemeteries. Is this *The Cry* found in the celebrated painting by the Norwegian



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artist Edvard Munch at the end of the nineteenth century or the primal scream that has made its way into more contemporary psychology? Paradoxically, there is no voice from the people of Komaland to definitively answer the question.

The second aspect of importance in Koma terra cotta sculpture is the use of multiple heads and limbs. Bicephalic figures are fairly common and occasionally more than two heads are employed in a singular work.

Here again there is an ancient tradition for this practice: the Roman deity Janus

sports two heads or rather two faces, facing in opposite directions, one looking to the past and one looking to the future. The month of January gets its name from the ancient myth.

Multiple arms are found in early Indian sculpture of Siva, the dancing divinity, holding diverse attributes in each of the additional arms and hands. In the Hindu religion the deity, Saiva Trinity, wears three heads, one facing left, one facing right and the third facing front. Deities are enhanced by additional heads and limbs, as a way of conferring upon them powers not found in mere mortals. This practice in the Koma society may be seen in exactly the same

way. The impulse to express transcendental qualities in special entities is found in Africa as well as elsewhere.

Komaland terra cotta sculpture from Northern Ghana has a place in the history of African art and world art, too.

— Philip Gould, *Curator*

RECOMMENDED READING:

Anquandah, James, *Koma, Balsa, Its Art and Archaeology*, Roma, Studi Istituto Italiano per L’Africa e l’Oriente, 1998.

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Pygmy Paintings



Pygmies are found in forests across Equatorial Africa but the area of concentration is in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more specifically in the region of the Ituri Forest. Pygmies maintain a hunting and gathering society that some claim dates from the late Stone Age. Pygmies wear very little clothes, have very little possessions apart from a knife, a bow and arrow and their way of life is sustained by what they find in the forest day by day. One exception to this account is the production of paintings used on special occasions as loin cloths. But even here the paintings, once the occasion for their creation is past, are disposed. The Pygmies are confident that when they need additional painted bark cloth they will be up to the task.

The materials for Pygmy paintings come entirely from the forest. The inner bark from trees, found between the

outer bark and the wooded center, is striped and cut into rectangles or squares (about 20” by 35”) and pounded against a large smooth log until the bark becomes soft and supple. Men traditionally perform these functions. Once the bark is ready for painting the women take over. Women are the artists. They work with a dark pigment that is derived from roots or other plant sources, using a finger or a twig to apply the paint. The painting is a social event with a group of women gathered together, the bark cloth draped over their knees, as they paint. Sometimes two women will work on the same piece; each tackling one half and when this occurs it is easy to see that each painter has a style unique to herself.

The issue of style is of the greatest importance; as a generality it can be said that the bark paintings are a compelling

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artistic experience. They are invariably fresh and vibrant and a delight to the eye. With the most meager of means, isolated in the Ituri forest of the Congo, the illiterate M'bute Pygmies have demonstrated a distinct aesthetic gift. What makes for the success of their paintings? First of all, each work has a distinct unity, the parts belong together, whether the composition is dense or

sparse. There is no possibility of "modeling" or shading as practiced in the West because the bark absorbs the pigment quickly. But effects of light and dark are achieved by the use of line alone; many short lines drawn close together stand out as dark compared to the areas left unpainted and what follows is a dynamic alternation of lights and darks. These areas are joined from time to time by a connecting line; there is no way to predict when these joinings will occur, they just do. So the field is full of surprises, of unexpected links. At times the lines run from one edge of a panel to the other without monotony because each line is rendered in an individual way, and small variations of closeness and openness keep the field alive. Groupings may tumble in one direction and then in another in a way that evokes the herring bone patterns of Jasper Johns' recent paintings. In fact, the abstract nature of Pygmy

paintings resonates powerfully with much of contemporary Western abstract painting. That explains why Pygmy paintings enjoy such popularity today around the world. Some scholars are not sure if Pygmies were influenced by Western artists such as Paul Klee or if the influence went the other way. What is certain is that both cultures share common aesthetic virtues of simplicity, complexity, innocence, invention, spontaneity and the clear joy in the act of creation.

— Philip Gould, *Curator*

RECOMMENDED READING:

Meurant, Georges, and Thompson, Robert Farris, *Mbuti Design: Paintings by Pygmy Women of the Ituri Forest*, New York, NY, Thames and Hudson, 1996

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Koma Terra Cotta African Sculptures and Pygmy Bark Paintings

Feb. 6 – March 31, 2009

Hours: Mon. – Sat., 8:00 am – 10:00 pm

Lobby Showcases, Joseph Shenker Hall
LaGuardia Community College
 31-10 Thomson Avenue
 Long Island City, New York 11101
 Tel: 718-482-6037

Reception: Tue., Feb. 10, 2009
 5:00 pm – 8:00 pm

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 33 St./Rawson. Walk two blocks west.

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