From “Negro Sculpture” to “African Sculpture”

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This year, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of Negerplastik, a pioneering essay by Carl Einstein on African art (1915), the Jacqueline Chambon publishing house is re-issuing the translation previously published at L’Harmattan by Liliane Meffre (1998), rounding it off with Einstein’s second essay on the same subject: La Plastique africaine. This 1921 text, whose first translation appearing during Einstein’s lifetime in 1922, had long been unfindable,1 has here been rigorously retranslated by Liliane Meffre. These short and dazzlingly dense essays offer testimony about the outstandingly free way of looking at things by the person who was one of the first European promoters of “extra-occidental” arts. La Plastique nègre is still a key text both from the viewpoint of modern art, through its Cubist interpretation of African statuary with an assumed partiality, and from the viewpoint of knowledge about African art, specialists in which still take seriously Carl Einstein’s thesis about the treatment of volumes and space in sculpture.

This publication is the fruit of a remarkable collaboration between the Germanist Liliane Meffre, a Carl Einstein specialist and an expert in his relation to the artistic avant-gardes, and the art historian Jean-Louis Paudrat. Whereas Jean Laude, with whom Paudrat worked, had commented on Negerplastik in the early 1960s,2 and then started work on its re-translation, Jean-Louis Paudrat offers no interpretation but here carries out important work on the iconographic part of La Plastique nègre, including more than 100 caption-less
photographs depicting African masks and statues (or pieces from Oceania, resulting from
errors made by Einstein). The identification of the works, and of their provenance and
their “traceability” in the history of collections, represents a decisive contribution to this
publication, including from the angle of “post-colonial” discussions about the history of
the pieces held in European museums and private collections. In carrying on the work
already undertaken with Ezio Bassami for the 1998 edition, Jean-Louis Paudrat completes
and corrects the captions this time present, but often fragmentary, for the photographic
content of La Plastique africaine. In addition to its documentary interest, this selection of
some 160 photographs, in full-page reproductions, reminds us that Einstein was not just a
brilliant theoretician. He was also very keen on the form of the exhibition catalogue and
the informational booklet—La Plastique africaine appeared in the Berlin collection Orbis
Pictus, famous for its small initiatory volumes on the history of art. Intensely oblivious of
the educational aspect of these “booklets”, in them Carl Einstein appreciated the
disproportion between a pithy text and a surfeit of images, not to mention the absence of
any direct link between the former and the latter. Even if—which is something
exceptional in his oeuvre—he delivers commentaries on works in some of the texts in this
collection, and he strove to caption the photographs in La Plastique africaine in a quite
precise manner, and to thus situate in cultural spaces the pieces for which La Plastique
nègre had first offered a formal and more aesthetically-oriented reading, the photographs
remained free of any annotation. These series of images, whose rather classical style is
slightly surprising in this scourge of “frontality” (advocated in the same period by
Heinrich Wölfflin for the photography of Greek statuary) were selected by him, produced
at his request (certain works are presented as being part of an “Einstein collection”, and
ephemeral in nature), or borrowed from others (in particular he asked for help from his
close friend Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler). Above all he did not want them to serve as a
repertory of “decorative” motifs for the “applied arts” (terms which were egregiously
derogatory when used by his pen), nor as a source of primitivist inspiration.

3 The connection made by Carl Einstein between African sculpture and the work of the
Cubist painters was not based on the fact of any linkage between the former and the
latter. He was not interested in the effective links between these arts. If he examined
African sculptures with great interest, it was first and foremost to try and better
understand what, essentially, the notion of Cubism encompassed—an obsessive enigma
which he was still pursuing throughout the following decade, when he published his book
on Georges Braque (1934). His interest was not focused in any primordial sense on this
latter’s oeuvre or on Pablo Picasso’s, or on African statuary, despite the exemplary value
which he recognized in this latter; he tried above all to propose a theory of the “cubic” (das Kubische) and of the principle of three-dimensionality capable of alerting the works to
volume, space, and life.

4 The term “plastique” (sculpture) was used by Einstein against its traditional accepted
meaning: far from referring, as with Johann Gottfried Herder, to the modelling of a solid
matter offered to touch and eye as a replacement for a tactile reading, it described a
certain way of innervating space, and organizing it around a plurality of “central points”
and “accents of composition” which could not only find a place within a void of matter, a
hollow, but even introduced a third dimension outside sculpture, within the two
dimensions of a picture. The work formally developed its “autonomy” within an inner
structure which freed it from any dependence with regard to the viewer’s eye. It was in
this gap in relation to the classical accepted sense of a “perspective” that, according to
Einstein, the ritual effectiveness of certain statues could be established, along with the veneration which they were the object of. In his analysis, their “presence” did not have to do solely with collective phenomena of the projection of group beliefs in an artefact. It had to do above all with a formal criterion linked with the cubic disposition based on which the work “radiated” its authority. Einstein was a pioneer in the linkage between ethnology and art theory. In particular during a stay in Brussels, at the Tervuren Museum, he carefully read the works of the German Africanists of his period, such as Bernhard Ankermann, Paul Germann, Felix von Luschan, the book by father Henri Trilles, *Le Totémisme chez les Fan*, and products of the English school such as *Antique Works of Art from Benin* by Augustus Pitt-Rivers. In the six years which separate *La Plastique nègre* from *La Plastique africaine*, he did his utmost to specify, historicize and differentiate his vision, and learn how to distinguish between styles and cultures. He nevertheless remained faithful to the idea that the formal analysis of works alone made it possible to describe their religious and social function. The eye of one who knew how to examine forms opened up the only fully legitimate access, from Einstein’s viewpoint, to arts which ethnologists and culture specialists could not entirely describe. He accordingly defended an extra-academic approach which could not lay claim to any erudition or, even more so, any empirical field experience. The complements and corrections added today by the editors in the captions and even the rectifications of the incomplete bibliographical references provided by Carl Einstein himself should not make us forget about the intentional dilettantism of these texts, or their irreverent stance in the face of “scientific” productions.

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