From “Negro Sculpture” to “African Sculpture”

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19184>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.19184

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 November 2015

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Isabelle Kalinowski, « *From “Negro Sculpture” to “African Sculpture”* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 45 | 2015, Online since 04 November 2016, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19184> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.19184

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

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REFERENCES

Carl Einstein, *Les Arts de l'Afrique*, Arles : Actes Sud : Jacqueline Chambon, 2015, (Rayon Art)

- 1 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 re-translated 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.
- 2 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)³ 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).⁴ 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,⁵ 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.

NOTES

1. Einstein, Carl. *La Sculpture africaine*, Paris : Crès, 1922, Documents d'art. Trans. Thérèse and Raymond Burgard
2. Laude, Jean. "L'Esthétique de Carl Einstein", *Médiations*, n°3, 1961, p. 83-91
3. Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Comment photographier les sculptures*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998. Translated and introduced by J.-C. Chirollet
4. Einstein, Carl. *Georges Braque*, Bruxelles : La Part de l'Œil, 2003. Translated by Jean-Louis Korzilius. Introduced by Liliane Meffre
5. Cf. Herder, Johann Gottfried. *La Plastique*, Paris : Cerf, 2005. Translated by Pierre Pénisson