

Die Kunst der Naturvölker

The development of the reception of African Art from Ethnographica to Art Objects in Imperial Germany

Ernst Große (*Die Anfänge der Kunst* 1894) wrote that his work had fulfilled its purpose if it would convince those researchers of art and culture, who are looking for answers, that answers can be found in the field of studying the natural and cultural conditions of the art of primitive peoples. When Leo Frobenius quoted parts of this work in his study *Die Bildende Kunst der Afrikaner* (1897), it seems as though Große had written down what Frobenius had already started to elaborate in *Die Kunst der Naturvölker* (1894); a scientific, philosophical, and historical analysis of African art.

The applied terminology, methodology and theory was an important part of this first interest in non-European art. Große and Frobenius were both committed to ethnography and therefore developed their theses in order to gain a better understanding of the respective peoples and their cultures as well as the underlying *Elementargedanken* [elementary ideas]. In the same year in which Frobenius published his *Die Bildende Kunst der Afrikaner*, Karl Woermann began work on the first volume of his three-part book series *Die Geschichte der Kunst aller Zeiten und Völker* (1900) which deals with the art of pre- and non-Christian peoples and is the first one to include African art in an extensive study of the history of art.

This world art history is not only based on ethnographic studies, which were generally very liberal, but also adopts the structure of a social Darwinian scale of cultural evolution as had been described in Haeckel's *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1. Edition 1868). Within this scheme, the so-called Benin Bronzes take up a special position, which, different from other art objects from Africa, were viewed in historical perspective and given a higher position than was described by Haeckel. Here, Woermann relies particularly on Frobenius' who remarked in 1897 that 'the Africans [...] Africanize every matter.' According to Woermann, this 'Africanization' of a European bronze casting tradition qualified the objects from Benin, as African art. The used bronze, the technique and the quality of the casting, however, suggest a highly developed culture that "among the Negroes [stands] at the top."

The authors and studies mentioned form the beginning of a general development of the reception of African art, starting from an ethnographic discourse towards the introduction into the discussions of the history and science of art. Part of this historical examination is to

consider how the specific institutional procedures and processes of ethnography and art history influenced the reception of African art in unique ways. In addition, this presentation will address the specific social, political and methodological contexts of these works.

The late 19th Century is a pivotal point in the historiography of African art and forms the starting point for Frobenius' studies in the "field." His early works were not just influenced by ethnology in Germany but his ideas also impacted new questions in fields like art history. I will argue that the way in which the ethnographers and art historians interpreted the objects was central to shaping the way they were, and to some extent still are, received in Europe.