



JAMES MARSTON FITCH
NATIONALISM, PATRIOTISM AND THE PRESERVATION
OF THE ARTISTIC PATRIMONY IN THE NEW AFRICAN STATES

The preservation of historic architecture and works of art has always been an expression of patriotic sentiment, local or national. But it has not always been seen as part of a larger problem — the protection of the whole national artistic patrimony. Today, this is a more significant task, and a more pressing problem, than ever before. The sheer destructive power of modern technology, even at its peaceful tasks, everywhere threatens not merely the continued existence of historic buildings and works of art but also our continued access to the cultural treasure-house of the folk-lore and conventional wisdom of pre-industrial times. This is a much greater asset to the cultural future of all nations — “advanced” and “developing” — than is commonly recognized. It is very obvious in the new African states. Here past and future are telescoped: everywhere, one meets historians and ethnographers, economists and townplanners, architects and archaeologists, dancers and artists, whose routine assignment it is to build a modern industrial society out of a primitive, pre-literate and colonialist past. And to do it immediately, with no time for transition.

I have met several young African historians who hold the first university chairs of national history in their nations' histories. They are expected to teach the history of their countries. But there are no written histories or literature, there are no textbooks. In some of the new countries the written record begins with the Nineteenth century. “Prehistory” in Kenya, for example, means “before 1890”. These young scholars, trained in historiography in European universities, are thus compelled to write the histories of their respective fields at the same time that they teach them. On weekends and vacations they head for the bush with camera, notebook, and tape recorder. There, in the villages, they interview the village historians — elderly keepers of the oral tradition who are almost certainly the last generation of their species. The knowledge they hold not only of the remote past but also of the recent past is irreplaceable. (In a society without written records these men are the depositories of the genealogies of local kings, of the metes and bounds of tribal lands, of the proper ritual for community celebrations). The oral histories are often astonishingly long — in Uganda they encompass the reigns of more than thirty kings — and they are rich in significant detail for the social historian. But they are completely encapsulated. Their chronology is local, without a cross reference to external cultures. Only an occasional reference to eclipse or earthquake offers some chance of calibrating the local sequence of events with those of the world outside.

Nevertheless, the African historians hope to push the written record back at least to the opening of the sixteenth century by using these oral traditions. It will require a great amount of work on their part. Hundreds, even thousands,

of village historians must be interviewed. The tapes must be transcribed, then translated from the dialect into French or English — the two languages of scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa. Only then can these local histories be interpreted, analyzed, and recast in modern form. The capstone of this colossal task of compiling a history of all Africa which will be comparable in scope and accuracy to Western historiography will probably be the *Encyclopedia Africana*. This project, begun under the editorship of the late, great Afro-American W. E. B. Dubois, is now under way in Ghana.

For the historian of art and architecture, the problem is also difficult. The durability of the art forms of the African past depends on the material out of which they are fabricated and the climate in which they occur. The mud architecture of the dry Saharan regions lasts almost indefinitely — a peasant's hut may collect the dust of centuries. And fragile funeral wreaths of herbs and flowers survive in Egyptian tombs for millennia. But in equatorial Africa, heat, humidity, bacteria, and insects combine to limit the life of all organic materials — wood, fabric, and leather — to a few decades. Thus even monumental architecture and sculpture is tragically short-lived. How great is the loss caused by this equatorial attrition can be clearly seen in the magnificent fragments which survive in the museums of Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda. From the great bronze-incrusted doors and portrait sculpture of Benin and Ifé we get a glimpse of a splendid plastic tradition. But these metal masterpieces constitute only rare landmarks in the vast terra incognita of African art. The voids in between must be filled in by patient research on the part of the historian, archaeologist, and ethnographer — an immense task that is scarcely under way. And here, as in social historiography, isolation from the main world currents imposes certain limitations. Because of them, the African art histories are apt to be more typological than chronological.

In architecture the problem is somewhat easier. Because of climate the Saharan mud architecture and the wood and stone architecture of the Ethiopian highlands survive fairly well. And this is very fortunate, for these areas afford some of the most beautiful as well as the most functional folk architectures of the world. Equatorial Africa also abounds in an astonishing and beautiful variety of architectural forms, but they are highly transient. Even the great royal tombs of Uganda are built entirely of straw (including the arch ribs which support the thatched roofs) and must be reconstructed every twenty years.

Since this vegetable-fiber architecture is so well adapted to the tropical climate, and since the raw materials are cheap and plentiful, one would expect to find a great demand in present-day Africa for modern chemicals that would render these fibers resistant to flame, rot, and vermin. But it is a typical African paradox that, instead, thatch is everywhere being replaced by corrugated metal. Made of either galvanized steel or (increasingly) aluminum, these shiny new roofs wink up at one's plane all across the continent. Expensive, ugly, and hellishly hot, they nevertheless have the prestige of modernity. They are longer-lived and more trouble-free than the traditional thatch, and they mark the owner as up-to-date. Thus do climate and technology, either singly or in combination, work to obliterate the wonderful folk architectures of Africa.

The high mortality rate of the artifacts of material culture is one reason for the visual poverty of the average village. To the casual visitor from the West there is a startling lack of that magnificent religious and funerary art which he

has seen in the museums. Even the simplest tools, utensils, and furniture of daily life seem nonexistent. But the ethnographer will explain that appearances are somewhat deceptive here, and that the lack of visual art forms is more than made up for by a wealth of poetry, song, and dance. Normally inaccessible to the outsider, this is the chief vehicle of African creativity.

But these "invisible" forms of art are not immune to civilization, either, and will require protection if they are to survive. Radio penetrates everywhere. Cheap tabloids follow literacy. The shoddiest of all movies (mostly American, Alas!) dominate the motion-picture screens of the towns. Patriotic Africans are much disturbed by this cultural erosion. In both Nigeria and Ghana I heard concern expressed about the vulgarizing impact of Afro-American jazz upon indigenous music. Even so careful an artist as the American dancer Pearl Primus, who has the greatest respect for African dancing and makes a serious attempt to interpret it, was viewed with dismay. Her so-called "ethnic" dances were felt in Ghana to be inaccurate, inartistic, non-African.

The poets and novelists face another sort of problem. Generally speaking they aspire to write on African themes for a mass African audience. But that audience scarcely exists as yet — the illiterate herdsmen and peasants are still the captives of the oral tradition. Hence the paradoxical situation in which African writing is better known in Paris or London than in the author's own country. This creates an ambivalence of which the writers are uncomfortably aware. They are confident that a pan-African audience will emerge; meanwhile they have to act as though it already exists.

With independence, the people of some thirty-six African states have stepped through the looking glass. Issues which were literally matters of life and death before liberation seem now to have evaporated. Even in Algeria and Kenya, where the battle for independence assumed murderous dimensions, one hears little talk of those days and sees little evidence of them. In Nairobi, where only ten or twelve years ago the white planters wore side arms in the main streets and the natives were herded into "protective" villages, the visitor today sees both sides placidly riding the same buses, drinking in the same bars, attending the same schools. The traumatic experiences of the past have undoubtedly left wounds, but these appear to be healing with astonishing rapidity. Instead, a whole new range of problems now becomes apparent. Having won that so-desired future, the new countries suddenly discover an unexpected importance in the past. As long as they were colonial pawns the prestige of Western culture held unchallenged ascendancy. In the colonialist capitals, the small African elite modelled its life after Western prototypes (importing canned American goods, for instance, or performing Noel Coward comedies in their amateur theatricals). But, with independence, a profound shift in taste has set in. All over Africa today new idioms in dress, decor, cuisine, and protocol are being evolved before one's eyes.

Nowhere is this clearer than in matters of dress — a problem complicated by the fact that in large areas of the continent clothing is a very new idea indeed. Thus one reads in a Ghanaian newspaper an angry letter from an upcountry reader who writes to denounce (in good English) the statement of another reader who has said that maidens still appear naked in the market of his natal village; they do so no longer, he indignantly declares. In the very same paper there are pictures of local fashion shows and beauty contests in the Western style.

Businessmen and government officials often wear Western-style suits. The

light-weight, drip-dry suit is ubiquitous. (But it is always dark in colour, never white: the immaculate white linen suit of the Empire seems to have vanished along with the colonialists who wore them). A high government official in Addis Ababa, or a college professor in Ibadan, may dress very much like his opposite number in Rome or London. But all over Africa the male can apparently wear either local or international dress with equal aplomb, changing his costume — and thereby his whole appearance — with enviable ease. Side by side with the internationalist fashion, national costumes are often *de rigueur* for formal occasions. Thus in Ghana and Nigeria a capacious full-sleeved, knee-length tunic is worn over tight trousers of matching material; alternately, a great toga is wrapped around the waist and thrown over the shoulder, Roman style. The material is cotton, either white or boldly patterned in brilliant colors. In Ghana the formal-dress version of this costume is made up in the traditional *kente* cloth — an expensive, hand-woven fabric of multicolored six-inch-wide strips, woven on a narrow loom and then stitched together. In the Sudan the classic white burnoose is worn by all classes of men, at all types of work. It is topped off with a turban of white-and-green or white-and-orange cotton.

The same sort of inventiveness may be found in women's clothes. In Ethiopian cities there is an almost universal costume — a very long, very full skirt over which is worn a long sari-like scarf. Both are always made of a sheer, hand-woven white cotton with multicolored borders. Essentially the same dress is worn by working-class women in daytime and — more stylishly cut and carefully made — by upper-class women at evening parties. In both cases it is extremely becoming to the chiseled features, dark coloring, and slight figures of the Ethiopian women. It is so popular that very little Western-style dress is seen on the streets.

Not only clothing but woven fabrics themselves are relatively recent arrivals in equatorial Africa. The only truly indigenous fabric seems to be tapa cloth, which is beaten out of various tree barks. And even today very little cloth is actually produced in Africa — most of it being imported from England, Switzerland, and the Orient. In view of this the control that African consumers exert over the patterns and colours of these fabrics is simply astonishing. Almost without exception they are ravishingly becoming to African pigmentation, physique, and temperament. In Kenya and Uganda one sees flaming yellows, reds, oranges and umbers in bold, large-scaled patterns. In contrast the Ethiopian taste seems cool and reserved: a favorite import seems to be diaphanous nylon scarves in fluorescent pinks, greens, and tangerine. In Nigeria greyed blues, muted violets, and sulphureous yellow-greens are popular. In Ghana one length of these fabrics forms a skirt, and another forms a sort of hammock where the ubiquitous baby sleeps astride its mother's hips. The fascinating thing about these beautiful costumes is that they are genuinely national at the same time, "high style" and popular.

His past confronts the African with all sorts of challenges. The re-evaluation of his own folklore was inevitable, since it represents a resource of both cultural and economic value. But its exploitation and development is fraught with great danger for both folk art and folk artist, as many African ministries of culture are well aware. Ethnographers, art historians, and museum curators are exploring this field for the loftiest reasons. But folklore is also a valuable tourist asset (along with scenery and wild animals) because it attracts hard currency to the unbalanced economies of the new countries. How to make use of it without corrupting it is a delicate problem in cultural engineering and one for which there is not much

precedent. Thus the commercialization of traditional sculpture is already far advanced. At every airport and every big hotel a curio shop sells inept mass-produced imitations of the masks, idols, and totems of the various tribes. And the European sections of the big cities are crisscrossed with peddlers of "antique" sculptures (occasionally, really antique), some of them from half a continent away. No one seems to know exactly how this trade has developed. It obviously shows the presence of alert entrepreneurs (white and black) responding on a local level to a new tourist demand for "curios". And it obviously poses a clear threat to the survival of one of the richest and most varied plastic idioms on earth.

This type of commercial degradation of native traditions is the most apparent, but it is merely symptomatic of the general impact of modern industrial society upon all forms of preindustrial art and artisanship. Even under the best circumstances the results can be unfortunate. In Khartoum I met the Brigadier General who, as director of Sudanese tourism, had been catapulted willy-nilly into a key position in folkloristic activities. A cultured man and a painter of some merit, he had been asked by the government to stage the first national celebration of folk dance and singing. Presented at the National Theatre in Khartoum, this brought together dancers from all the ethnic groups in the Republic from the devout and decorous Moslems of the north to the pagan pastoral peoples of the south. These latter habitually wear no clothes, and the General had felt constrained to dress them, for the plane trip to the capital as well as for the stage. But dress them how? He clothed them in the only garments he had at hand — bras and short skirts for the girls, short pants for the men. The aesthetic impact of this costume on these handsome dancers was grotesque — a fact which the General realized. What to do? He needs skilled designers and choreographers who can study these splendid people in their native habitat. Though they may not wear clothes, they have magnificent ornaments and jewelry; from these, experts could evolve a costume which, while meeting the minimum requirements of modern travel and metropolitan streets, might enhance rather than cripple their appearance. But, as in so many African dilemmas: where to find the experts? the time? most of all, the funds?

In Accra I saw a program of song and dance staged by one of the many amateur groups that are a feature of the Ghanaian capital. Initially I found the skill and enthusiasm of these young dancers and musicians engrossing. But long before the program was finished (and despite the different names of the fifteen different dances), it became for my taste very monotonous. The program had no beginning, no end, no sense of theatrical structure. One of the ethnographers in the cultural ministry explained this paradox. Under primitive conditions there are no performers and no spectators. Everyone dances and no one gets bored: when one gets tired, one stops. How to restructure these art forms for the modern relationship of artist-proscenium-audience without at the same time extinguishing the fire and spontaneity is a central problem of the African folklorist.

All serious observers realize that the governments must intervene if all these forms of folk art are to be saved from the certain annihilation which otherwise awaits them. At the same time, it is difficult for these new countries — beset by so many more urgent problems — to give effectual help. Even in the remotest bush the economic base of the village artist-artisan is being radically altered. With the decline of paganism and the spread of secular culture, the demand for ritual and funerary art declines. Traditionally all this art was commissioned piece by piece, and the identity of the artist was usually well known. Robbed of patronage,

the artist becomes a simple craftsman. Wood carvers become carpenters or cabinet-makers. Metalworkers become blacksmiths. And the decay of the idiom proceeds at an accelerated pace. Thus, all folklore, traditional arts and crafts, and historic architecture are in a perilous state.

Actually, three interrelated but separate cultural tasks are involved here: (1) the preservation of the artist-artisan; (2) the preservation of his craft or metier; and (3) the preservation, physically, of examples of traditional forms of his art. The ethnographic museum is the proper vehicle for the last. Craft schools and apprenticeship training programs can accomplish the second. But only a comprehensive program for state-subsidized and protected workshops and retail outlets can save the craftsman and attract a new generation. Without help, handicraft production cannot be expected to survive the naked competition of modern mass production.

No African state, so far as I know, has yet been able to launch such a program, though there are many interesting new institutions in the Dark Continent that hope to solve one or another aspect of this problem. A program of training schools, craft shops, and retail outlets is under discussion in Ghana. Ethnographic museums are being created everywhere; they might well take their inspiration from the new Institute of Arab Folklore in Cairo. Soon to be housed in its own new campus near the Pyramids of Giza, this combined museum and research facility will have five sections — painting and sculpture, architecture, dance, music, and literature — and will be the centre of a vast projected program for the regeneration of Egyptian folklore and handicrafts.

Many African universities now have advanced institutes for national studies and are carrying on impressive work in music, literature, history, and the visual arts. At the universities of Ifé and Ibadan in Nigeria, a group of devoted scholars are working directly with folk artists in the villages, subsidizing their work and displaying and selling it in the cities. Here, too, are the *mbari* (literally, "creation") clubs, aimed at establishing centres of artistic activity in the rapidly growing towns. New trade and craft schools, like the one established by the late Empress of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa, are springing up everywhere.

The attitude of the young Western-trained professional artist toward all this cannot be other than complex. As one teacher of a Ghanaian art faculty has put it: "in speaking of a contemporary art in Africa, distinction must be made between 'contemporary art in Africa', 'contemporary African art', and 'art in contemporary Africa'". Thus in the galleries and museums of the African capitals, as well as in the homes and conversations of the intelligentsia, modern European painting and sculpture enjoys much the same prestige as in Paris or Milan. The abstract expressionist school of New York is well known in the art schools of Uganda and Ethiopia. Returning home from years of subsidized study in the schools and studios of Europe and America, the African artist feels impelled to teach Western theories and techniques. Hence, professional work in the galleries or student work in the art schools often seems very familiar to the visitor from the West.

Fortunately there is another side to the picture, for the pressure of African reality is very evident in the subject matter, if not the style, of most contemporary African painting and sculpture. In the new monumental architecture of government buildings, museums, and universities the demand is for an art that deals in intelligible terms with African experience. Naturally, individual response to this demand varies widely. On my travels I met an impassioned young Ugandan painter

who believed that the development of a national artistic idiom is a patriotic duty; and a very prosperous young Ethiopian artist whose work, which ranged from society portraits to stained glass for Coptic churches, would have found a ready market in Manchester or Kansas City. The issue is anything but resolved.

The position of the young architect or city planner is much the same. In Europe and America he has seen in operation those technological processes which promise escape from the hunger, disease, and squalor that characterize the existence of so many of his countrymen. Very often the landscapes of his childhood, whether jungle village or urban slum, have become the hated symbol of life under colonial rule. Hence his receptiveness to our criteria of modern architecture and urbanism: for him, they have come to symbolize physical comfort, security, cleanliness, abundance. The unfortunate fact that Western cities so seldom, or so unevenly, accomplish all this often escapes him. The glass-skinned skyscraper and shadeless street, the outward-looking house and open lawn, the wasteful automobile and sprawling suburbia are imported *carte blanche*.

The power of modern industrial technology is so great that, in purely formal terms, these African facsimiles can be quite as well built as their Western prototypes. But, operationally, the results are often grotesque. Thus one sees cities of half a million people where traffic jams are caused by the private cars of a minuscule elite while fantastically long queues of workers wait for a few decrepit buses. Picture windows confront shadeless deserts. Air conditioners go mad in glass-walled skyscrapers in the Nigerian rain forests. Everywhere one sees heat-holding pavement instead of heat-deflecting foliage, open space where common sense dictates cover, transparency where opacity is the first requirement of comfort.

Despite many differences in history and culture, Egypt shares the artistic dilemma that faces the sub-Saharan states. This dilemma was dramatized for me by a visit made with an Egyptian friend, an architect and teacher in Cairo. We had gone together to the ancient Coptic enclave in the old quarter of the city. This extraordinary mud-walled remnant of the medieval city contains a magnificent museum of Coptic art: several Coptic churches (some of them dating from the sixth century); a Greek Orthodox church; a Jewish synagogue, centuries old; and cemeteries belonging to all three faiths. Around these extends a large residential quarter where poor people of these faiths, as well as some Moslems, live in harmony. By conventional criteria, the flies, dust, bad sanitation, and overcrowding make this indubitably a huge slum. But from another, and equally valid point of view, this is one of the best-designed districts of Cairo. The narrow streets, palm-and vine-shaded courtyards, thick mud walls, small windows, and inward-turning plans combine to make a sophisticated and urbane response to the merciless Egyptian climate.

Yet my young Egyptian friend, after an hour, could stand it no longer. It was all very well, he told me, for foreigners to admire these picturesque medieval forms. But for a man who loved his country, who wanted to see it rebuilt on a more just and humane basis, this quarter, he said, was the stinking embodiment of everything he hated — ignorance, hunger, suffering, apathy. Normally a gentle man, he spoke with explosive wrath. For him it was literally not possible to breathe in such a milieu. I knew that his own grandparents, by God knows what combination of struggle and luck, had fought their way out of just such a situation, establishing the family on the edge of the modern middle-class world. He was too close to this quarter emotionally to view it with

anything but blind repugnance.

Under such circumstances, it did little good to warn against throwing the baby out with the bath water. Nevertheless, it is precisely the task of his generation to avoid this mistake. It is his greatest responsibility to isolate the bad from the good, the obsolete from what is still viable in his tradition, and incorporate the good and viable in the plans for the future. I heard the "open plan" and the transparent wall of modern architecture praised by young intellectuals in this part of the world because, for them, it symbolized the liberation of the Moslem family from the crippling confinement of harem, purdah, and feudal relations generally. The fact that the desert sun, dust, and searing winds beat in through these newly opened walls did not dismay them. It was, they insisted, a small price to pay for the new social perspectives opened up.

But it is perfectly apparent that, in order for the new African architecture and urbanism to accomplish its minimum objectives, it must return to an attentive examination of its own pre-colonial origins. Two factors make this inevitable. On the one hand, even under the most favorable economic and technical conditions imaginable, it will be decades before Africa will have achieved the technological basis for Western architecture. And long before this is achieved, it will have become apparent that the Western prototype, whether in individual buildings or in whole cities, is ill-adapted to Saharan or equatorial Africa. The profoundly antipopular, antifunctional character of the new African cities is already sufficient proof of this.

Nationalism always carries the germ of xenophobia. But this danger, in the field of art and culture at least, does not seem to me very great in Africa today. Most young African artists and intellectuals have been trained in Western centres and have returned from this experience with a viewpoint of artistic and cultural possibilities that, if anything, is too cosmopolitan rather than too parochial. At the same time, their new-found national consciousness leads them to a growing interest in the pre-colonial folklore of their own cultures. Under the circumstances of rapid industrialization, this new "artistic patriotism" seems to me to serve a useful function. At the very least, it interposes some barriers to the ruthless demolition of all preindustrial arts and crafts. At the best, it could contribute to a new integration of primitive and postindustrial aesthetics, to new artistic idioms of unique value and world-wide significance.

The two tendencies — a fascination with the whole apparatus of Western technology and a growing understanding of the significance of their own past — create an ambivalent situation. The result is that Western and African modes of expression — in costume and cuisine, architecture and art, music and dance — coexist and compete. It would be hazardous indeed for an outsider to predict the outcome of this complex situation.

Only modern knowledge, modern science and modern technique can give Africa the abundance and well-being she aspires to. But these forces can never be more than fertilizing agents, catalysts acting upon African resources, human and material. The Africans' greatest single resource for building their artistic and cultural future is their own autochthonous past. This past will not survive without care and protection, any more than it has in Europe and America, as we are tardily beginning to understand. The salvation of Abu-Simbel and other monuments at Aswan could well serve as a paradigm of all of us, at home and abroad.

JAMES MARSTON FITCH
NATIONALISME, PATRIOTISME ET CONSERVATION
DU PATRIMOINE ARTISTIQUE NATIONAL
RÉSUMÉ.

La conservation des monuments historiques n'est qu'un des aspects d'une plus vaste tâche d'ordre culturel: la conservation du patrimoine artistique du passé pré-industriel dans sa totalité.

Ce patrimoine doit être considéré comme une entité qui comprend soit l'urbanisme et l'architecture soit les arts visuels, la poésie, la tradition, les chants et la danse, jusqu'aux coutumes, aux tissus, à la cuisine. Sa protection implique l'intervention de l'Etat à trois stades différents: 1) l'artiste et l'artisan lui-même, 2) la base technico-économique de son métier ou art, 3) l'intégrité artistique de ses formes traditionnelles d'art.

Les nouveaux Etats africains offrent une éclatante démonstration de l'urgence toujours plus grande de cette tâche. D'une part, le patrimoine pré-industriel est menacé par l'expansion de la technologie, d'autre part, au contraire, ce même patrimoine possède de nombreux éléments de grande utilité fonctionnelle pour la construction des nouvelles nations. Une compréhension croissante de ce phénomène de la part des artistes et des intellectuels s'exprime dans une espèce de « nationalisme artistique ».

C'est à nous d'aider l'Afrique à préserver ses formes de culture autochtone: et c'est ainsi que nous découvrirons à quel point les mêmes nous attendent chez-nous.