MELVILLE HERSKOVITS AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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PAS Working Papers
Number 20

ISSN Print 1949-0283

ISSN Online 1949-0291

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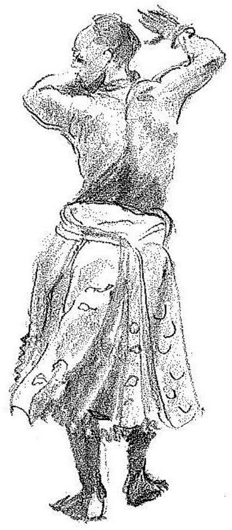
Any understanding of Herskovits' theoretical approach to the visual arts must be framed in the context of his doctoral graduate studies with Franz Boas at Columbia University. This was brought home to me recently by Kevin Yelvington, a biographer of Herskovits, who graciously sent me copies of Herskovits' class notes from Boas' seminars, dated 1922 and 1923. There they were; the lecture content on the arts that was to become part of *Man and His Works*[1] some 25 years later.

The short digression that follows can now be seen as necessary to any discussion that refers to the title of this paper. Boas' approach to the study of human societies and their variation was based on his original training in science as taught in Germany. From the study of physics and exact sciences (with fieldwork on why there are variations in the color of sea water for a doctorate in physics[2]), he entered the world of the human mind and the universals of human societies. His hosts in Greenland, the Inuit, so intrigued him with their adaptation to their environment and their social organization that he welcomed the opportunity to transfer his physics study from Greenland to Baffin Island and its great expanse with the Inuit "cousins" there. His imagination was captured irrevocably by evidence of human variability as a "scientific problem" worthy of a scientific approach.



Drawing by Justine Cordwell. Based on the photograph by Margaret Drewal 'Shango man in mid-dance, Ede, Nigeria, 1971' found included in the article "Pageantry and Power in Yoruba Costuming," by Henry Drewal in J. M. Cordwell and R. A. Schwartz, eds. The Fabrics Of Culture: The Anthropology Of Clothing And Adornment (The Hague : Mouton Publishers, pp. 189-230, 1979)

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[1] Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York, A.A.Knopf, 1948)

[2] Franz Boas, *Beiträge zur Erkenntniss der Farbe des Wassers* (Kiel: Schmidt und Klaunig, 1881)

In Europe, Friedrich Ratzel and other geographers of the 19th century had given a name to the study of the exotic ways of life that they encountered in other lands such as those of Africa. When describing these societies they called it "'human geography." Boas was to become far more specific. He had discovered, through his fortuitous choice of field laboratories, that there seemed to be universals of social organization common to all human societies and that the specific solutions that had evolved in each individual society comprised the culture of that group. The solution to the study of a culture could be to analyze each aspect of another culture, whether behavior, or more physical, substantial evidence in its totality; as if such were a "problem" to be solved analytically. The analyst would then become a social scientist.

One winter evening, three of us, graduate students of Herskovits, trapped that gentleman on the stairs of Locey Hall as he was leaving. Locey Hall was the location at that time of both his office and the Anthropology Department offices. "Please, Dr. Herskovits, help us with a question. We're training to be social scientists, but this term sets us up to be teased by the biology and chemistry majors in this building who claim that we can't possibly call ourselves scientists." He didn't even pause to think… "Just tell them that you're interested in and studying social problems. And in so far as it's possible you're objectifying human behavior." It wasn't until I received Herskovits' class notes from Kevin Yelvington that I realized our professor was quoting Boas almost verbatim.

To understand the source of Herskovits' theories concerning any studies of the visual arts one has only to examine the 1922-23 class notes written down by Herskovits while taking courses from Boas or the 1927 Boas book entitled *Primitive Art*[3]. This term, incidentally, has tactfully become ethnic arts or comparative arts, to name two alternatives in use today. Boas stressed the historical development, the dynamic conditions under which art styles came into being, while acknowledging that realistically this is not always possible. He particularly wanted to emphasize that aesthetic pleasure is felt by all humans; this was his personal message that bigots have no real grounds for their personal views. Boas felt that a perfect standard of form in art could be attained only by a highly developed and perfectly controlled technique; therefore there must be an intimate relationship between technique and aesthetic feeling. He believed that formal perfection created true art and a deeper aesthetic reaction in the onlooker. He felt that perhaps Ernst Grosse was right (as Boas interpreted this art historian- aesthetician) that the real meaning in art is found in the completed form.

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[3] Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo, H.Aschehoug & Co., 1927)

Boas selected symmetry as a second formal characteristic of art; following the above technical virtuosity. His third formal principle was rhythmic repetition. He called it the rhythm of time translated into space.

Boas' formulation of ways to examine visual arts was never intended as a methodology. His analysis of the visual arts touches tantalizingly close to the realm of feeling and aesthetic creativity, then rushes back again to the concrete and familiar; the physical object, the end product. Boas also believed that aesthetic emotion could be released by observation of natural forms and the grandeur of nature. However, nothing in his scientific training prepared him for the philosophical analysis of aesthetic questions.

Helen Cordere, who bravely prepared Boas' field notes on the Kwakuitl for publication long after his death, defends Boas’ analysis of art, particularly that of Kwakuitl design, such as the artist's depiction of an animal in many aspects (front, back, side view and x-ray of internal structure) all on one flat side of a storage box. Actually, the artistic analysis in this case is more cognitive than aesthetic. The latter comes about in the arrangement of the individual parts in such a way that the viewer's eye can follow them comfortably. These arrangements are the aesthetic and non-verbal.

In his own field work Herskovits and most probably Frances S. Herskovits as well followed Boas' formal principles. However they did so with the addition of an understanding of Africans and their descendants in the New World and their wonderful improvisations in the arts, whether in music, dance or any of the visual arts of dress, containers, altar compositions, murals and even advertisements. The Herskovits' saw the creative joy in extemporaneous invention that sometimes led to changes in style and convention on a permanent basis.

They began to see that artificial dichotomies of pure and applied art did not necessarily apply to non-Western art forms. Though Herskovits still kept reiterating statements about realism as compared to conventionalism, what he probably meant to compare was naturalism compared to stylization. Following his teacher's lead he emphasized the search for the aesthetically pleasing, or beauty, as a universal in all humans' experience. Thus, inadvertently he gave his students carte blanche to search for and study this aspect of culture in whatever society they happened to be working.

It can be seen that both Boas and Herskovits were well aware of the interaction that was taking place in the mind of the artist between his or her technical skills and the artistic symbol they were creating. Both scholars discussed the importance of form, texture, color, rhythm and symmetry. However, by using such analysis they were doing exactly what Boas did in *Primitive Art*—analyzing the art of another culture by using means borrowed from their own.

Both men more or less avoided discussion of more basic reasons for our reactions to art forms. This consists of our affective (un-analytical) emotional response which is made up from several phenomena. First, the human propensity to project one’s own feelings into another person, imagining, even briefly, that they exist there. A part of this type of thinking (which is projective) is to anthropomorphize other living species, endowing them with human emotions and even rational thought, and to carry this even further achieving the same results with inanimate forms or even created art forms.

The second factor is empathy or the ability to feel sympathetically in other living beings what we imagine to be joys, sorrows, pain, love or hate simply because we have experienced them ourselves. This can occur in extreme instances that many of us have known, sometimes only momentarily when we forget a beloved pet isn't human and endow them with emotional reactions that would be ours in the same circumstances. When elaborating on the aesthetic creative drive neither Boas or Herskovits emphasized the drive to symbolize an affective experience. Some creative individuals can do this more successfully than others, not because of technical virtuosity as Boas claimed, but because in the non-verbal, aesthetic symbol they create others can empathically feel the tensions and resolution of tensions that occur in human life experience no matter what their culture. Edward Bruner and Victor Turner have gone beyond this to point out that it is not just in aesthetic symbols that humans create symbols of expression that display their own unique feeling about undergoing an interpretation of some aspect of their own culture but the feeling that one had in experiencing it. In other words, no one experiences a culturally patterned way of doing something except in their own unique way of doing so. Whether one is able to express this verbally or through symbolic behavior or created symbol it clearly is an indication that while there may be cultural "rules" of social behavior or proper ways of creating or performing practically anything human, each of us experiences our culture in our own way, expressing our unique reactions whatever way we personally find best for ourselves.

The Program of African Studies at Northwestern University was fortunate in so many ways that its founder, Melville Herskovits, had such a genuine love for the expressive arts. No small part was played by the fact that he had been trained in the violin. Then too, for both Mel and Frances Herskovits, language and the written word were their own medium of aesthetic expression. For analytical purposes in the study of dance, music and the graphic and plastic arts Herskovits depended on Boasian theory. However, to his great credit he sought out students in all branches of the arts for their possible contributions to the studies of African aesthetic expression and that of their descendants in the New World. He learned much from all of them; sometimes through their field materials and often, too, from theoretical papers given at anthropological meetings, both local and national. There, his encouragement and physical presence and gently probing questions concerning something that might have been left out was the saving of many a pair of knocking knees.

Though Mel and Frances co-authored a number of books, it is only in *Rebel Destiny*[4] that Frances' concise yet flowing, pleasant style is apparent. Mel’s writing had a tendency to pile parenthetical clause on top of parenthetical clause until a whole long paragraph would appear as one long sentence. Once, when I was helping to proofread the typed carbon copy of *Man and His Works*[5], I started to read a paragraph beginning in the middle of a page. Its explanations went on and on as more thoughts on its central point became apparent to the writer. Hitting the bottom of the page, I started on the next. On went the explanatory clauses until, finally, I hit a blessed period in the middle of the next page. Keeping a smile to myself I walked into Herskovits' office to show him his one page, one sentence paragraph. When he started to laugh, shaking his head in disbelief, I offered him my sympathy. I told him that both of us suffered from the same problem. My father, though born in New York City, came from a Bavarian family where only German was spoken at home. One by one as the children went to school when five years old, they refused to speak anything but English. Not lost, however, was the Germanic explanatory structure of parenthetical clauses: a habit I never lost, my English husband could attest eventually. He used to say that he could hardly wait until I reached the end of a crucial sentence so he could find out what the verb was.

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[4] Melville and Frances Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York, Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. 1934)

Dahomey demonstrates a mixture of their styles, but Herskovits always gave full credit to Frances' skills not only in descriptive writing, but in interpretation. In the instance of this field trip, her techniques and talents in drawing out informants were formidable. She was not only taking down their information in French but was taking down Fon phonetically. Then, she translated it into English.

From then on, except for *Dahomean Narrative*[6] with Frances, the style and expression of ideas were to reflect Herskovits' own play with words and ideas. It was very apparent to his graduate students that *Man and His Works* was a gauntlet thrown down at the feet of a formidable array of anthropologists who had been fellow graduate students at Columbia University under Boas. They had done "real" fieldwork, in contrast to his own library-researched dissertation on the cattle complex of east Africa.[7] A.L. Kroeber, Leslie White, Ruth Benedict, Gladys Reichard, to name just a few, all came out of Columbia before and after 1920. Mel Herskovits with Frances was to go on to produce a formidable array of books on the cultures of Africa and their New World descendants as well as the groundbreaking *Myth of the Negro Past*[8]. Thus it was almost foreordained that Herskovits would want to give the summation of his total field and teaching experience in a general text which is a truly monumental work.

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[5] Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1948)

[6] Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative; A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1958)

It was an honor (totally unexpected) for me to become his first T.A**.** in the summer of 1947. He wanted me in residence so he could supervise my illustrations for *Man and His Works.* I certainly was not an anthropologist though I had it as an undergraduate minor. I had taken physical anthropology at Berkeley, a class into which Kroeber allowed me because I had had pre-med zoology. Herskovits was pleased that during World War II I had volunteered at the Field Museum for a few months measuring a series of Melanesian human skulls for Wilfrid Hambley, and later, in 1944 another series of skulls, Chinese, for Ernest Hooten at Harvard. There I also met Wilton Krogman who, over several discussions convinced me that I belonged in cultural anthropology, not physical.

While having to read Herskovits' manuscript in typed form I got my first glimpse of his theories on creative human behavior in the arts. I learned a great deal about folklore and music, but then I found some really deep flaws in his theory concerning the visual arts. Even though I had had two years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a B.A. in Art Education from Northwestern's University College, I was ill-prepared in social science and theory, particularly anthropology. I certainly was ill-prepared to question anything put forward by so eminent an anthropologist who also was my mentor and employer.

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[7] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Cattle Complex in East Africa* (Ph. D. Thesis, Columbia University, 1926)
[8] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1941)

Herskovits' confidence in both his own hypotheses and those of Boas on the analysis of the visual arts and their creators surfaced in *Man and His Works*. It was useful also in his later collaborative work with Donald Campbell and Marshall Segal in their book, *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception*[9]. However, it was his inability to grasp a way in which to explain affective response and the drive to create symbols of experience that blinded him to the usefulness of essential philosophical analysis. He dismissed the key work of philosophers such as Suzanne Langer and Douglas Morgan, even as these scholars were both teaching at Northwestern in 1951. Rudolph Arnheim's classical work as a psychologist examining the phenomena of both artistic drive and the created symbol was ignored when brought to Herskovits' attention[10]. Herskovits forged on with his enthusiastic assurance that he and Boas had the matter solved.

The truly important result of Herskovits' love of the arts and realization of their importance in lifeways was to come over the years as he sent student after student out into the field in Africa and the New World. All these students remembered his stress on the arts as a possible key to understanding the depths of other parts of a culture. What a harvest was reaped! Student after student uncovered and explored new ways of looking at and analyzing creative forms, whether ceremonies, architectural forms, personal dress or religious objects. Most importantly a focus emerged on how people felt about them.

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[9] Marshall H. Segall, *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966)

[10] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception; a Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1954)

An even more obvious result was the fact that Herskovits gathered an authentically aware faculty so that his students, both graduate and undergraduate, could benefit from William Bascom's fine feeling for West African arts in dance, music and sculpture. Richard Waterman, the musicologist also joined the Anthropology Department and introduced us to the joyous expression of Black Africa's musical forms and by extension, to the Afro-American music of North and South America and American jazz. Even the chemistry students of Locey Hall could jive to what was pouring out of the anthropology music lab and recording studio.

Dick Waterman regularly sought out visiting jazz musicians**.** He would invite them, solo or in small groups, to visit Evanston, and they would perform in any hidden attic we could find on campus. These men were stunned at times by our worshipful listening stances and genuine applause. We often wondered what the president of the university would think of our musical "seminars" at the feet of clarinet and trumpet players from the bordellos of New Orleans and St. Louis.

Edward Dozier, the folklorist, arrived to round out specialists in folklore. Francis Hsu was already at Northwestern with his psychological interpretation of the arts. However, the latter confessed to me, as his T.A., that as he attempted interpretation by individuals of picture content in psychological tests, he was still attempting to learn more of culture contact and interpersonal relationships with American culture. He had done his advanced studies in England, so that in spite of teaching in the United States, he was still feeling his way in a Herskovits type of department in the Midwest.

The rapid development of the Program of African Studies and growing number of graduate students it attracted was due to Herskovits’s foresight and his canny ability to attract the financial backing that made it possible. Thus he was able to bring speakers to lecture on relevant issues of contemporary Africa in order to benefit all graduate students in the Program which encompassed other interested departments as well, such as history, sociology and psychology. Herskovits' service to the U.S. Department of State and Defense during World War II gained for him the respect of many other federal agencies as well, so he had access to a vast pool of specialists on Africa from which he could draw up-to-date information, as well the personal presence of lecturers all made possible by his Carnegie grant funds. We graduate students were far better prepared for the field in terms of a post-war Africa than any other department at that time. An added bonus came in the form of older, more experienced students attracted to the program. In 1948, the average age of a student in the program was close to forty years.

Those of us who came into the department from other disciplines frequently found that we had to rely on methodologies not always approved by Herskovits; such as philosophy, music and the arts. Though he had introduced titillation or surprise as part of artistic analysis for example, he did not mention that it is also part of the analysis of visual arts. Robert Plant Armstrong (later to become editor of Northwestern University Press) came as one of Herskovits' doctoral students involved in the arts and folklore.

The whole field of volume design or negative space was certainly sensed by Mel and Frances in their own field work in Surinam and Dahomey. They thoroughly documented and described ceremonies, architecture and even living spaces in which single human bodies moved. They similarly described social situations of many persons in spaces culturally circumscribed to the appropriate size.

I was delighted to discover that many of their students focused on the importance of understanding the design of space because volume design is so important in our own culture that it would be natural to search for expression of it the cultures of other societies. When many of Herskovits's students were in the field they seemed to gravitate naturally toward a search for "their" peoples' solutions of living, professional and aesthetic performance spaces. I was particularly intrigued by James Fernandez' discovery of the importance of the form or architectonics of negative space by the Fang, which was "seen" and experienced only by them during ceremonies and every day living. Explanation of another type of negative space came to me by accident during a visit to Northwestern by Ralph Linton. When he found that my field was the visual arts he described a ceremonial Polynesian adze mounted on small truncated base of filigreed wood. He told me how he had expressed his admiration of it to the chiefly owner. "Oh, that's not all there is to it" was the reply. "There is a design surrounding it in the air that we can see, but you can't. And that is what makes it more beautiful."

The closest that I came to such negative design was in Dahomey when I was invited to a re-enactment of calling down the Fon deities for the benefit of visiting French officials. It took place on a hard-tamped space before a chief's residence and reception hall. The space used for the ceremony was marked off by stripped palm fronds, over which no one was allowed to step. The drummers were seated in a group within, on one side of the space. The space they occupied was also enclosed by the palm outer leaf ribs, within the outer ones. When all was settled and the guests were on the chief's veranda, there was a crash of drums and the calls to individual deities began. One by one the priests and their assistants would come forth into the sacred space to leap and twirl to the drumming call of that particular deity. During one set a toddler stumbled closer to see better and, tripping, fell over a rib into the sanctified space. With a terrified cry the mother ran to the child, but two attendants had already lifted the baby and pulled her back. It dawned on me that this might indicate that the power was indeed real to them. Though it wasn't visible, the fronds were on the base of a wall up to the sky, invisible to us as a sheet of glass. That was the reason for the frond ribs around the drummers. They needed protection from the very gods called down by them. In its weak innocence, the toddler would not have been able to withstand the power in which it was about to be submerged.

In the following few pages the reader will find in Herskovits' own words theories that we admired but were later to challenge from our own field work. These quotes came under the heading "The Aesthetic Drive: Graphic and Plastic Arts" in *Man and His Works*.

> It will be enough for us to recognize that the search for beauty is a universal in human experience…. Toward the comparative study of art, a strictly relativistic point of view must be taken…Otherwise the number of differing conceptions of beauty will so confuse us as to stand in the way of our understanding of those general principles of the form and functioning of art that emerge from a comparative approach to the arts of many societies.
>
> To understand how closely integrated with all of life and how expressive of a way living art can be, is again not easy for us who live in the highly specialized societies of Euroamerican culture. (Herskovits, 1948:378)
>
> When we (in art analysis) differentiate "pure" from "applied" art, we similarly restrict the play of our aesthetic appreciation. It can be safely said that there are no non-literate societies where distinctions of this order prevail. Art is a part of life, not separated from it.

> This did not mean that specialization didn't exist, for the best artists in any medium, as well as story tellers and musicians, are always known.
>
> In the widest sense, then, Art is thought of as *any embellishment of ordinary living that is achieved with competence and has describable form*. Competence can become virtuosity, which is the supreme control over technique that gives every society its finest aesthetic products. (Herskovits. 1948:380)
>
> **…**the interpretation of experience by the artist, in no matter what medium he may work, is the quintessence of artistic expression. (Ibid: 381)
>
> Realism is best defined as an attempt to *approach* reality in art ... But this attempt is, as we know, always made in terms of cultural definitions …
> (Ibid: 382)
>
> Extreme conventionalism in design is found in the art of regions where an attempt is only exceptionally made to achieve realistic portrayal. (Ibid: 383)
>
> Herskovits thoroughly rejected any artificial "evolution" of design as had been attempted by a few earlier anthropologists: "…. no developmental principle of universal applicability concerning any tendency to move toward conventionalization from realism, or toward realism from abstract design, can be established."
> (Ibid: 398)

Herskovits makes a very good point about style and its usage in the visual arts, which in a way is applicable as well to music, folklore and drama.

> It is essentially in its style that the art of one people, one epoch, and one artist even, is marked off from another. Under situations that might be considered conducive to change, an art style can often show great tenaciousness.
>
> The analysis of style, it must be clear, can be carried on quite without reference to the significance of art forms to the people of a given culture where they are produced. We have, in this particular instance, a parallel to our dual approach to the study of culture as a whole---the psychological and the institutional (Ibid: 398)

The artist as innovator was a concept central to Herskovits' exposition on the arts. He showed how the play with style could lead also to innovation.

> The directives laid down by any traditional style govern the artist even as he introduces change into its art forms. In every society the artist is the experimenter,

> the innovator, the rebel. But he is an innovator only within bounds. For his experimentation, he is influenced by factors that all unwittingly guide him in his creative experience, as they guide the behavior of all human beings in every aspect of their lives. In other words, the creative life does not lie outside the influence of the enculturative experience. (Ibid: 403)

But yet again, he imposes the formal aspects of art as a Westerner when he states:

> The elements that go to make up a style are termed the formal aspects of art. They include all manifestations of form that can be expressed graphically or plastically---rhythm, symmetry, the use of color. (Ibid: 405)

He wanted to be sure, however, that students understood creative play and also the reality, brought home by fieldwork, that artists in non-literate societies were not just copycats, even though there might not exist the idea of "art for art's sake as in our own society.

> **…** in practice all cultures produce examples of art forms where utilitarian needs are disregarded or where the aesthetic impulse refuses to be bound by the distortions of design in an object destined for use. (Ibid: 411)

In his summing up of this chapter on the visual arts---

> whatever forms art may take, however, it is manifested, it will be present. No art, that is, is haphazard or inchoate. It is the expression of the desire for beauty that finds fulfillment in the application of technical skill through sanctioned form, in terms of the patterned perceptions and imaginative resources of the artistically endowed members of every society. (Ibid: 413)

Man and His Works was reworked and re-edited at the suggestion of Alfred Knopf publishers and became *Cultural Anthropology*[11] in 1955. This new, tightened edition was far more readable in every way. Gone were the involved parenthetical clauses, as well as the overly long lines of type that required a fatiguing three, even four, eye shifts per line. The excellent new editing must be credited to Robert Plant Armstrong.

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[11] Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Anthropology: An Abridged Revision of Man and His Works* (New York, Knopf, 1955)

In spite of Armstrong's urging, there was very little change in the chapter on art and aesthetics. Herskovits refused to believe anthropology needed any help from philosophical analysis in aesthetics though a number of his graduate students had benefited greatly from Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*[12] and *Feeling and Form*[13]. Herskovits continued to believe that anthropologists did not need help from the philosophy of aesthetics and instead plowed onward making definitive statements as had Boas. To Herskovits, the visual arts consisted of drawing, painting, engraving and sculpture in wood and metal. His explanation of the onlookers' response to the art of non-literate peoples was a paraphrasing of Boas'.

> What attracts the person who sees specimens of an art unfamiliar to him is the skill with which they have been executed **--** the juxtaposition of color values, the manipulation of elements of form that comes from the long acquaintance of the creator of a given piece with the materials he employs.

What then were the effects of Herskovits' enthusiasm and his ideas concerning the arts on his students, particularly the means he suggested for observing and understanding them? For the most part, we had learned that our own affective response would have to serve us in the field and that our own talents and techniques of creating art forms would establish not only a rapport but ease the taking down of information gained. We would have to develop means of assurance that we were not with them to learn means to compete with them, but only to help our own people who admired the art to understand its use and symbolism. Thus, we also would have to draw on methodologies we had used in history, psychology, and philosophy as well as anthropology. Certainly, we developed our own techniques, a unique mixture, and tried to disguise them in the field notes we had to send home.

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[12] Suzanne Katherina Knauth Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1951)

[13] Suzanne Katherina Knauth Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, Scribner, 1953)

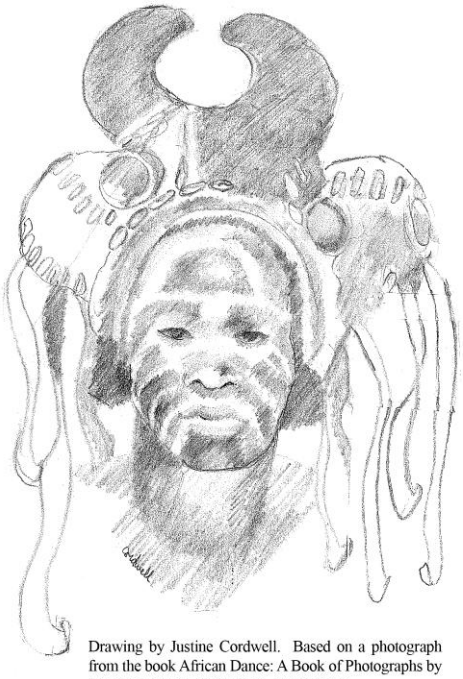
My own experience with Melville Herskovits represented a rather aberrant case because it was unique. I was the first student to go into the field as a trained, professional artist. I was to work with the Yoruba, move across the Niger River to Awka among the lbo, and from there go west to the Ivory Coast to work with the Baoule. Fate intervened with these study plans once I arrived in Nigeria. The country was erupting into unpredictable rioting against the British. I scouted out Awka and found it perfect. The British C.I.D., however, forbade me to return there alone because of security concerns after the Enugu riots to the north of Awka.

These realities simply were not understood by my teacher, who obviously was still thinking of West Africa as it was in the early 1930s in Dahomey. Finally he accepted my revised plan to study three or four sub-groups of the Yoruba whose art styles varied widely from those of Ife that Bascom had studied. I pointed out by letter that I would compare these styles to little known cultural and style patterns of the Bini of Benin City and stick to the original plan of emphasizing the role of the artist in culture change as well as the "why's" of how they created. My mentor at the Rockefeller Foundation was enthusiastic whereas Herskovits much less so.

My first rebellion was to seek out carvers among the Ijebu in southwest Yorubaland. After my first field notes began to arrive in Evanston, I received a barrage of airmail forms from Herskovits. You have to picture *him* pounding his desk and turning cerise. You just aren't getting deep enough. You must be asking the wrong questions! The carvers aren't telling you *why* they are designing the way they do! How do they *feel* about what they are doing!? In my subsequent correspondence with him I tried to explain that when a carver made sculptured figures, all the decisions in blocking out and balancing of forms, even surface reliefs were made quietly in the *mind*, responding to subliminal cues: all of which were non-verbal. The piece of sculpture was a created non-verbal symbol *in itself*. Anything that was later verbalized was a secondary rationalization.

No, no, no! said the letters from Evanston, you just aren't getting deep enough! The answer must be there! Not to belabor the point, I went on to shed my own culture's aesthetic standards and learned those of the Yoruba, finding the great, wildly artistic, receptive world of my hosts. They tried to make everything "have beauty" to make it “fine.” The latter was a term used to describe anything they deemed beautiful. Once I realized that everything that was truly important to them, in aspects of their culture, must be perfected, embellished, and molded into the best form possible, I found the aesthetic judgments of what pleased them most, the focuses of their way of life. Even the focus on ridicule for social molding of the correctness they so admired had its own standards of aesthetic success. If sociologists and anthropologists think that "doing the dozens" developed out of reaction to slavery in this country, let me disabuse you. It simply came from some status conscious Yoruba who decided to teach these Congo people the proper ways to “put the needle in." In Nigeria, jeering at mistakes or non-conforming acts becomes an art form in itself and is structured as aesthetically as possible.

The post-World War II world of trade had brought to the West Coast of Africa a bounty of color and riches second only to the cash pay of the British and American soldiers who landed on this Second Front in Africa with its supply lines that transported necessary supplies to North Africa. Many an African-American G.I. found himself fleeced by his Yoruba friends. The new goods that were pouring in when I arrived were transforming the material culture of the Dahomean Fon and the Nigerian Yoruba, Ibo and Bini. Bright, colorful trade cloths, oil paints for houses and furniture, Chinese enamel pans in bright colors to replace old pottery, new bright threads, cotton, silk and rayon for weaving brighter cloths, silks from the Orient and brocades from India for the titled and wealthy. All these and more were easily available as the sea lanes opened again to trade. The Yoruba fell upon them to enjoy embellishing not only themselves and their children but the interior of their homes.



Drawing by Justine Cordwell. Based on a photograph from the book African Dance: A Book of Photographs by Dominique Darbois (Prague, Artica 1962)

Thanks to all these new materials and mediums, I was finally able to work with not just the general public's aesthetic desires and standards, but with people in small towns (I had bought a Fordson van in order to roam freely), who would bring me to their local carvers and even take me with them to visit markets with goods for magically reaching the gods to protect their households or bring good fortune.

Herskovits kept complaining that I was not sending voluminous notes as he and Frances would have done. I had to defend myself constantly for I couldn't make them realize that every day I was recording life ways and work of creative people with the Anthropology Department's Speed Graphic's black and white film with multiple flash as well as my smaller 35mm color slide camera. One day, a Bini hereditary chief was showing me his principal altar when he stopped suddenly and said "Something is telling me that I must divine for you to protect you in your travels." When he finished the elaborate ritual, he told me that someone was trying to steal my stool where I worked and that, to reclaim it and keep it, my mother must make a feast and invite my "master."

The next week I received a letter from my mother saying that she had a sudden feeling that she should take the color slides I had had sent to my parents in Chicago after the film was developed. She took them to Evanston to show Herskovits and Bascom. Fortunately they were impressed and, realizing I was really producing, left me in Nigeria. My total production of note-taking on film was five hundred 8 x10 black and white prints and four hundred and fifty color slides. (These photographs are now being prepared for deposit in the Northwestern University Archives.) From each of these visual "notes," I was able to produce anywhere from one to sometimes four pages of “written” notes. The printing of the black and white photographs took approximately two months of nightly work in my little darkened kitchen in Chicago upon my return from West Africa. They were ready in their 8x10 inch size in time for me to accede to the Herskovits' demand to see them in their home one evening. He sat there with Frances going over each of the prints from the eight pound stack, intoning all the while, "This isn't Yoruba; This isn't Yoruba!" Finally, I could not stand it any longer and managed to break into his thread of comments. I explained that those particular carvings had been made by four different Ijebu Yoruba carvers who lived about seven miles apart in the Ijebu Remo area of the Yoruba in the southwestern part of Nigeria adjacent to the Egba in nearby Abeokuta. I also pointed out the portraits I had taken of each while they worked. I had to quietly point out that perhaps familiarity with Bascom's work and pieces from Ife and his own ibeji figures from the Egba plus my own photos would prove that the widespread subgroups of a large ethnic group like the Yoruba would demonstrate that their variations in art styles could be even greater than those in their regional dialects in their spoken word.

Two years later, my four hundred and eighty page illustrated dissertation at last sat on shelves in Northwestern University's library and in its Anthropology Department, topped in size only by Alan Merriam’s great 500 page dissertation on the music of the Afro-Caribbean cultures, *Songs of the Afro-Bahian Cults*[14].

Starting my fieldwork among the Ijebu of southwestern Yorubaland I was aided by chiefs and rulers of cities and villages of the Ijebu Remo area who, after I had respectfully saluted them and taken their portraits in full regalia, had me escorted to the workshops of their traditional carvers. I dutifully sat up nights typing up notes and a kind of daily diary to be sent back to Evanston. Shortly after these mailings arrived, there came many airmail forms from Herskovits. The mental picture that I got from them was that of him pounding his desk. You just aren't getting deep enough. You aren't asking the right questions. The carvers are not telling you *why* they are designing the way they do! How do they *feel* about what they are carving! It became obvious that I was supposed to be finding out what he had missed because I was a trained artist talking to another professional. I was afraid to tell him that in all of Boas' publications and manuscripts there was not one indication that he had *ever* asked such questions of Kwakiutl artists or any Inuit.

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[14] Alan P. Merriam, *Songs of the Afro-Bahian Cults: An Ethnomusicological Analysis* (Evanston, Northwestern University, 1951)

In my return correspondence with him from “the field” I tried hard to explain that when an artist is doing sculptural work all the big and little decisions in the blocking out and balancing of forms, as well as the surface decisions are made by non-verbal responses in the mind to subliminal cues that cannot be put into words. The entire form and the creation of it is non-verbal in nature. Anything else that *was* verbal is a secondary rationalization. “No, no, no!” said the letters from Evanston, “you just aren't getting deep enough. The answer *must* be there.”

Not to belabor a point, but this is when I had started to shed my Western standards and let the Yoruba teach me about their own aesthetic talents and standards, letting Herskovits try to figure them out from my translations. The richness and depth of the multi-faceted Yoruba, the Edo-speaking Bini and lastly, the Fon never ceased to amaze me, and still continues to do so.