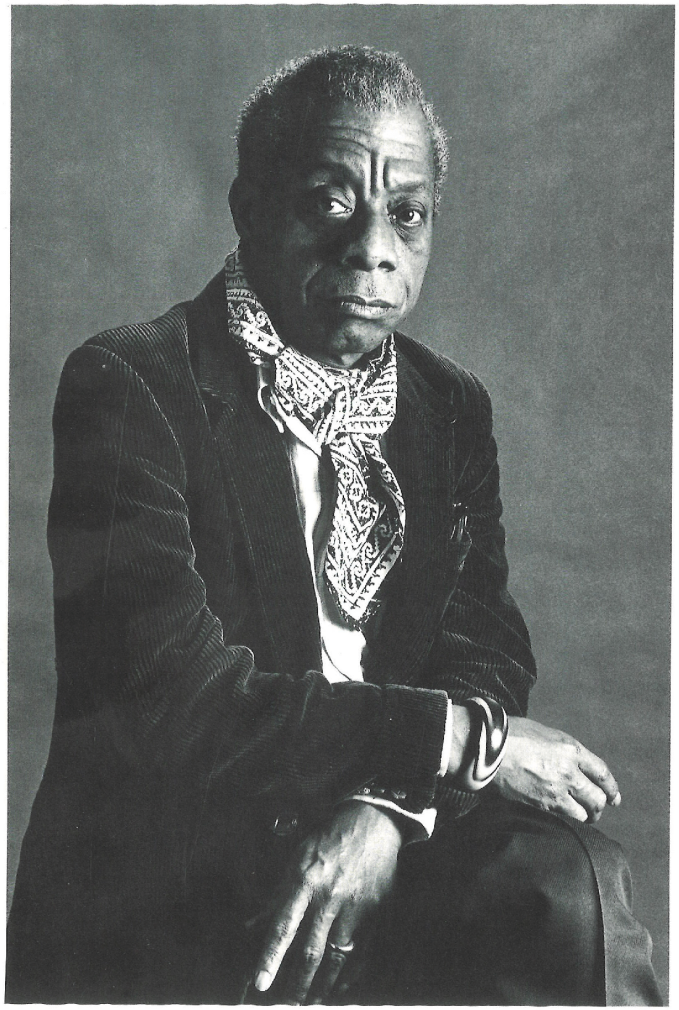
JAMES BALDWIN



The American author, James Baldwin, is well-known as an essayist *(Notes of A Native Son; Nobody Knows My Name; The Fire Next Time)*, novelist *(Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, Another Country)*, and playwright *(Blues For Mr. Charlie, The Amen Corner)*. Mr. Baldwin has devoted his life and art to probing the complexities of human relations, the experience of the black American family, what it means to be black and what it means to be a man. His writing has won numerous awards and prizes, among them, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. Internationally prominent as a writer, intellectual, humanitarian, and spokesman for civil rights movements, Mr. Baldwin lives in southern France and is currently working on a novel.

"The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he's unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it."
from *The Fire Next Time*, by James Baldwin

I feel reconciled to myself and my past; in fact to everything. This art speaks directly to me out of my maligned and dishonored past. I come more directly from this than from Rembrandt. Rembrandt means an awful lot to me too, and so does Picasso, to name but two. But this work has been buried, this has been destroyed. We are looking at remnants, fragments of civilization and of civilizations which have something to do with me, and also something to do with you. But you hide it. You historically have denied that; you've done everything in your power to destroy whatever civilization produced this work. Therefore I have to have another connection with it because what you do to them, you are trying to do to me. These are my children. How would I not know this is African! It says something directly to me because I am black. Because the world is composed of black people and white people. What does it mean to be black? It means that you're not white. It speaks to me more directly than other things might because the fact that ***I'm*** *still here and that* ***it's*** *still here says things to me which it would not be able to say to you. People think that I am black, inferior to them. Black people live in white people's imagination, really. There's a great imbalance. Because I don't walk around—no black person I know walks around—with a white person trapped in his skull. But white people do. And it controls them. You see what I mean. White is a state of mind.*

I've been aware of African art most of my life because of the Schomburg collection in Harlem. I've known it since I was nine or ten. I do remember that it made an impact on me. Pieces spoke to me. They spoke to me from a long way off. We recognized each other. Perhaps that's the best way to put it. It's not mysterious to me. Appealing is not a word that I would use. It's a similar connection that I have with Miles Davis or Leadbelly or Bessie Smith.

You don't realize that you're asking me very personal questions. You think you're talking about art. But you're not! You're talking about something else. You're talking about something which the West as a group has done its best to destroy. And it's still doing it's best to destroy. I'm talking about a kind of testimony to what a human being is or can be—which this mercantile civilization is determined to ignore. And to kill if it can. I know they cannot live without it. They don't yet. They'll find out. Every one of these things we've looked at - there have been thousands more that have been destroyed. And the people have been destroyed—or everything has been done by the Western powers to try to destroy them.

I know the things we looked at. It's forever, a criminal record. Much worse than criminal. And it is not in the past, it is in the present. The record is terrifying. And the attempt to destroy it is not in the past, it is in the present. I am talking about the rape of Africa. We are looking at the remnants of that rape. What's disturbing is not simply the artifacts which have remained; what is disturbing about it is the attempt to destroy its sensibility. It's the audacity of the idea of color. And it's the audacity too of the idea of profit! I was on the stock exchange; my children were on the stock exchange. The price of slaves, the price of rice—they were on the same board. People speculated on both.

The artist's work is his intention. There's this curious dichotomy in the West about form and content. The form is the content. I think the work of artists is to be useful. To have such works, to have them on the wall—you walk in and you are among friends. It's very different to me, and not at all real for the people who may be looking at these objects. They will not, in short, know what they are looking at. One way or another, they don't want to see it. They want to make it something extraneous, something exotic. But they know it contains their lives too. And I have other things to do than to try to translate anything for people who don't want to hear it. The mathematics of their lives, the algebra of their lives is built on not knowing it.

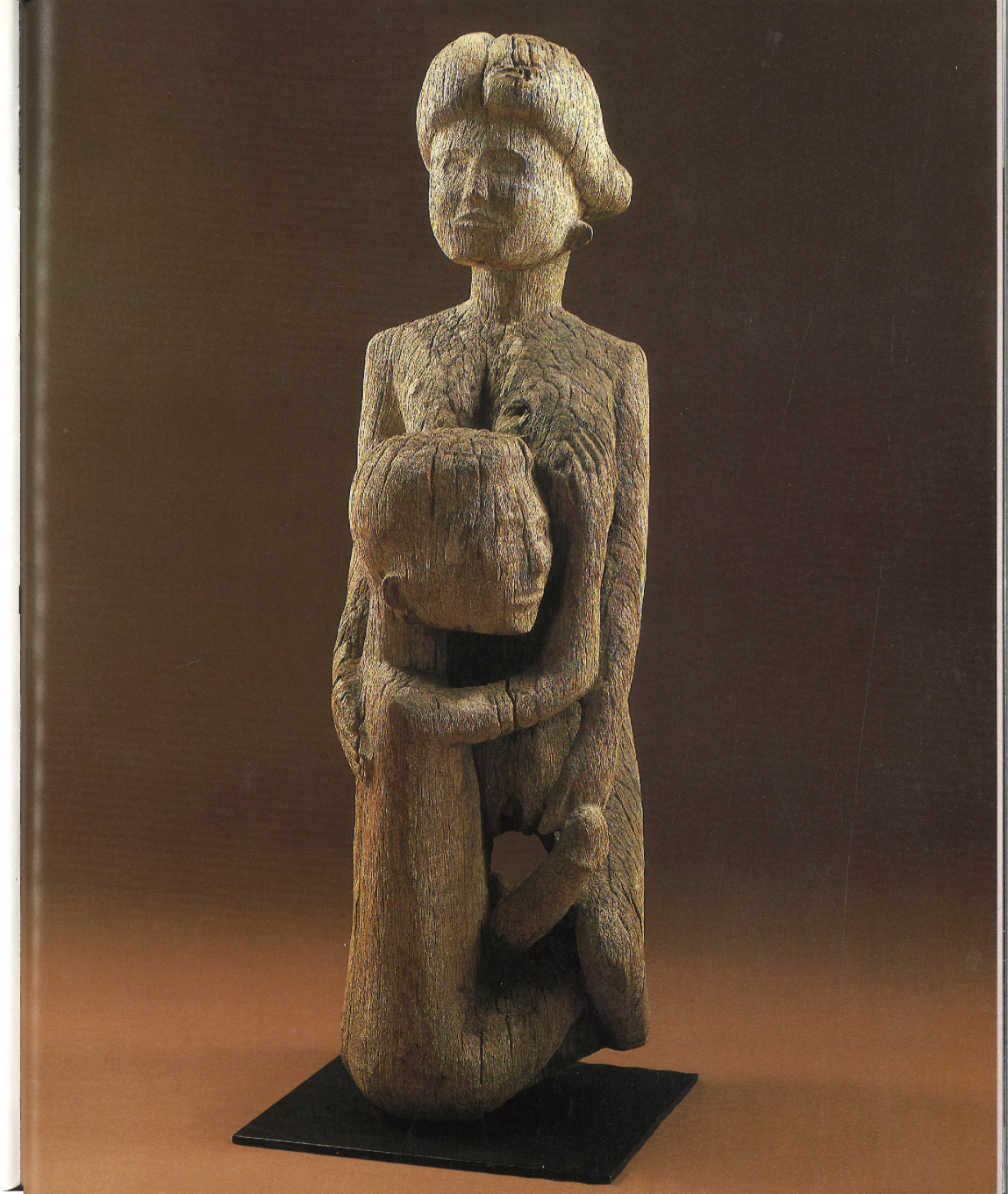
Then, maybe I'm tired of being a missionary. I'm talking in historical generalities. This is revealed in the choices—the social, political, and economic choices we make. In a way it's as though you're asking me to talk about Art Blakey. I'm not going to talk about Art Blakey. You want to find out? Go and expose yourself to him. You can't find out through a middleman anyway. You wanna play the blues, somebody said, go out and catch them. Then you'll know something I can't tell you. And if I tell you, what makes you think you should believe it?

JAMES BALDWIN

MADAGASCAR MALE FEMALE PAIR

This is a mother and child, male and female figure. It's a curious combination, it's very ambiguous in a way. But let me find the words that I want. In other words, it's a combination of things. It's very, very gentle—the woman and the man. Though it appears that the man is more hopeless, despite the fact that he has a phallus. The way it's positioned is curious. It echoes his coming out of her womb and that she will be carrying his child. She's holding him and he's clinging to her. They're both indispensable. It echoes childbirth and it promises fertility. The craftsmanship is very economical. I'd like to write a novel like that. The key is somewhere in her face; the way she's looking out and the way he's looking—God knows what *he's* looking at. She's looking at the child she bore, the man she's bearing, and the child she will bear. She knows more about him than he knows about her, which is perfectly all right—that's part of their secret. Something about the arms and the breasts and his squatting and her standing suggests this to me. Is she standing or kneeling? No, it looks like she's kneeling. It's very beautiful.

It's hard to describe these things in a Western language. It speaks of a kind of union which is unimaginable in the West. Men and women distrust each other so profoundly that this piece would not be possible. No one on Madison Avenue could see that without being mad, without jumping off the roof. That's why we're called primitive. Primitive—what a curious word.



LUBA STOOL

It could be Samson. It's space that's something to be conquered. Not space in the American sense of Star Wars and all of that crap, but it's space of the world in which we live and the space of oneself. It's pushing back the boundaries, and it may turn you all around; it can be turned around and upside-down as well, but more difficult upside-down. Again, the form is the content, isn't it? She's outmatched by the weight around her, above her and below her—but she can change it. You can see this in the stance, in the arms, and the way she's looking out. She's not resisting; she's contesting. But the world is always, one way or another, the world she made. You have to assume that in order to change it.

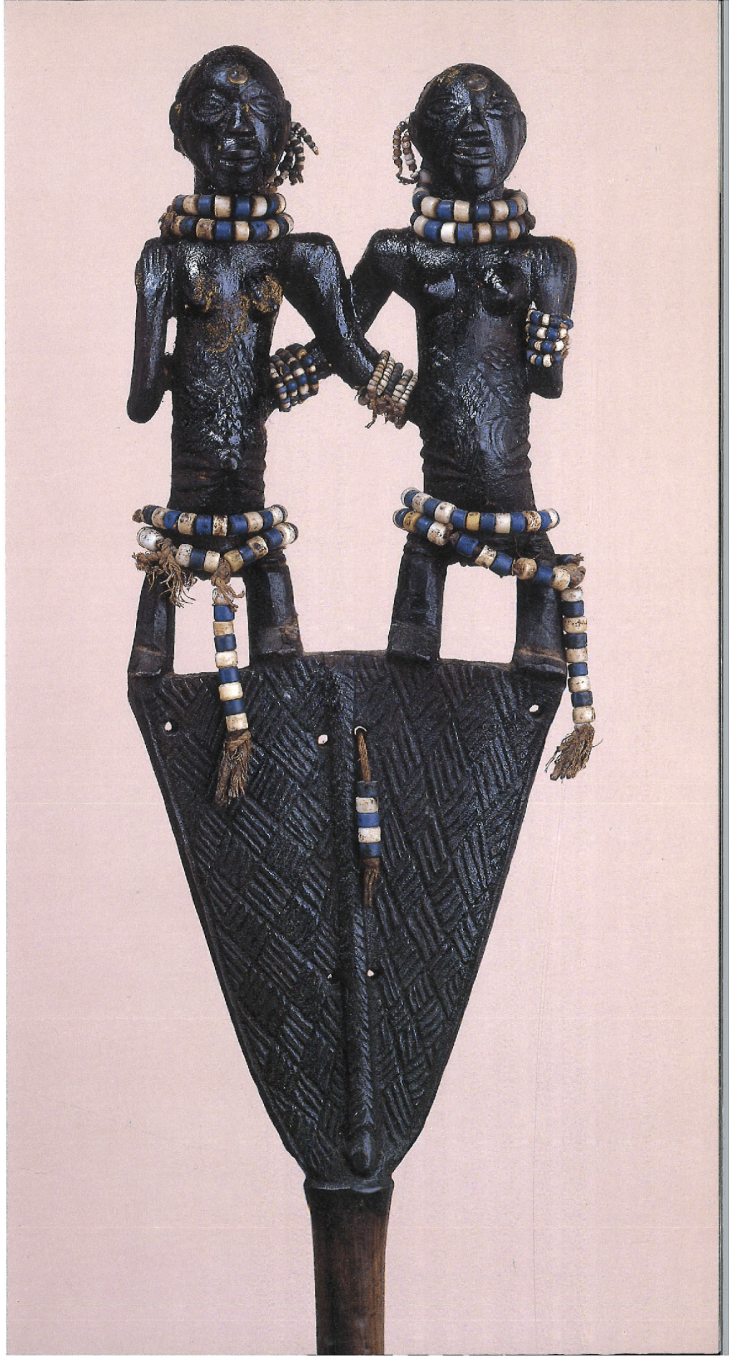
The texture is very elegant. It's not a hollow space, it's an open-ended space: everything is possible. And everything is also impossible. It's very important. It's very passionate—in the best sense of the word. All the artists are anonymous. Which, as Auden said once, is the real desire of the artist—to become anonymous. No doubt though, in the village where he came from, people who knew him would know this from some other piece of work. I can't go there. I'm not equipped at all to discuss that.

LUBA STAFF

I recognize the women; I met them in Harlem. But it's another time and another space again. They're the women who live in Harlem. They are the women who raise—it's impossible to translate this. I shouldn't even have to. The women have been here for 400 years, and now you ask me who they are! Find out. You can't find out through me, that's not enough. I'm not sure I can articulate it. I'm also weary, weary, weary of trying to deal with this—you should know who they are.

It's a kind of celebration. It's also a challenge: if they are not mowed down by a machine gun, they will get to where they are going, out from wherever white people condemn them. Twenty-four hours in a black man's life, or a black woman's life—put them in the market or the subway, it doesn't make any difference. I would not know the details of the culture, but I see this on Lenox Avenue: the style, the determination.

There's nothing mysterious about the two ladies at all. They're on their way to a celebration, or to a funeral, or just to take a walk. There's a great deal between them that's unspoken: paying rent, cleaning the house, dealing with the children, dealing with their husbands. It's conceivable that they are married to the same man; it might be so, given the breasts. One is sagging and one is not. Like I told you hours ago, it's another time and another space. It's all done in another vocabulary which I am not equipped to try, and wouldn't even attempt to articulate.

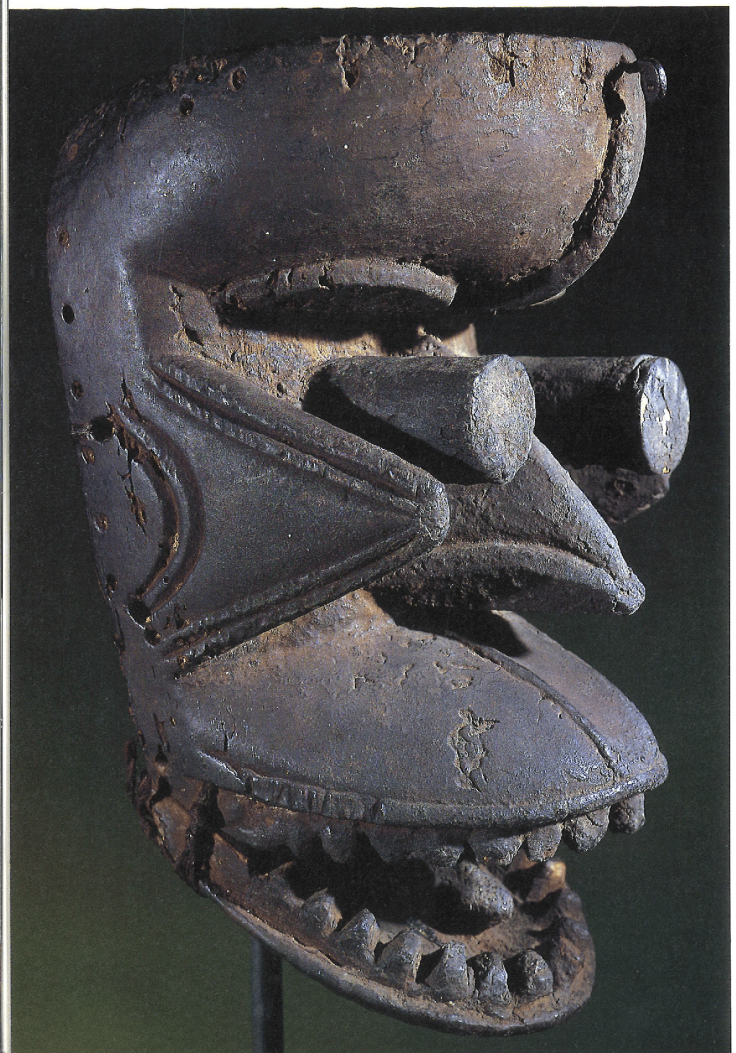


KONGO MOTHER AND CHILD

The key is her stance, the way she holds the baby in one hand; she's at once preparing the baby, and preparing to let him go. She sees what he's going to be facing and he doesn't see it yet. The baby is turned toward her. She has one hand protecting him, on his head. It may be that the baby is facing that way, but I think not. I think the baby is facing towards her. Her eyes look far seeing—into the baby's future. She might be anointing the baby. She's preparing him, in any case, for a journey. *She* knows about the journey—he doesn't yet. And she's also warning his enemies. Ah, but again, another time and space.

CHOKWE HERO CHIEF

There's a certain force in the body, in the shoulders especially. A certain eloquence and economy. But the force is what strikes you first. A very contained force, a very contained power. It doesn't feel malevolent at all. I suppose the word I'm looking for is authority. The whole thing—the hands and the feet; the neck and the shoulders, and the extraordinary headdress—are aspects that I like.



DAN MASK

You're asking me to be somewhat literal about it. I can't. I recognize it. I don't know how I recognize it. I don't know how to put it to you. I recognize a level of energy and passion which *this* time and space would like to kill—would like to obliterate that energy, that passion, and that perception. That's why it's called primitive.

It's extraordinary though, something between life and death, something from the skull. Something very—something clairvoyant, something fearless, perhaps. The clairvoyance is in the junction of the eyes and the eyebrow.

I don't think it's a question of preservation. I think it's a question of recognizing that this is eternal, that you can't kill it. In a curious way, you know, it's not as if we are seeing savagery; none of these images are hostile or frightening. They certainly aren't frightening to me. There's a reason Europe planned to destroy it.

DJENNE FIGURAL SCENE

I love it! What are they doing there? Everyone looks so calm. Even the animal. He looks tired, philosophical. Had a hard day, poor thing. He's leaning on one of the boys; he came there to rest. One of them is sitting under him—or her; you can't tell. They're all just taking a moment to rest. They're not strangers to each other; obviously he's not dangerous—he's brought his cup of cocoa. It reminds me of a song we used to sing in church called Peace In The Valley. But it would be hard to try and sing it. It's all the elements of the human being. Obviously they don't feel threatened by this, "the lion should lay down with the lamb." I grew up with that. But again, it's something impossible to discuss in the language of the West. It would require a language not yet forged. Or a language that's got to be excavated. The language in which somebody confronts and reveals our connections, our *real connections;* a language which will attack our definitions. It's a language yet to be honored. It's obvious it exists. The artist always knows this language.

I love this. But I'd be afraid to have it; somebody might break it. In a sense, yes, it offers me a sense of serenity. The Western world is so completely fragmented—I don't see how anyone gets through the day.

YORUBA MAN WITH A BICYCLE

This is something. This has got to be contemporary. He's really going to town! It's very jaunty, very authoritative. His errand might prove to be impossible, whatever it is. He's *one* place on his way to another place. He is challenging something—or something has challenged him. He's grounded in immediate reality by the bicycle. In other words, in another time. And therefore, in another space. The key to it, its tone, is confrontation. I imagine the confrontation is with the city. I didn't notice the crack at first. Was the crack deliberate, or did it happen over time? It adds a certain poignance, but it doesn't change my response. It seems to me distinctly different than the others; it's another time. It's much more literal. I imagine if I stopped him on the street, he'd ask me what I wanted—from a certain distance—but not with hostility. He's apparently a very proud and silent man. He's dressed sort of polyglot. Nothing looks like it fits him too well.

YORUBA MASK

There is something very peaceful about this. You get the feeling that whoever carved this looked around—and inside himself too. This strikes me as very—somehow very peaceful, very, very old. It's meant to portray someone very old—someone like my grandmother, someone who's been through everything. It's very tranquil. It lets you be assured, as if it's really been through it. It could be my grandfather, too; I don't see a physical resemblance at all, I mean metaphysical—something in the patience.

I find it very difficult to tell you what specifically attracted me. I feel I am being psychoanalyzed. It's probably something in my past. I've seen that somewhere—more than once. I've seen faces like that. I

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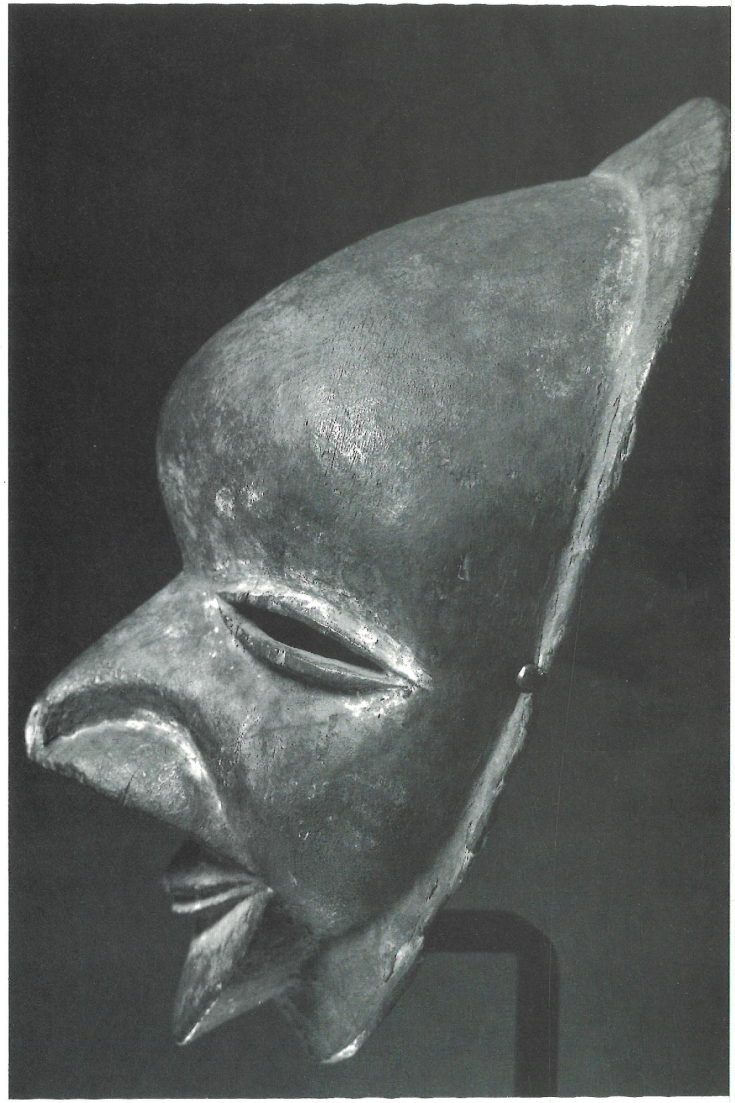

can't quite imagine what those eyes have seen, what's behind those eyes. I like the way the forehead has been rendered very much. It may be the key to it; I don't know. It's an indication of a certain wisdom, a quiet, and a certain patience. That smile is saying something. There's a smile in the eyes.

I wouldn't know enough about the circumstances or enough about the choices to write a story about that face, at least not on the spot. The language is not exactly mine, it's removed from me. It's not a Western face. One could say an African face, but it's something deeper than that. I can't find the word for it. *Africa*, for lack of a better term. *Time*, without thinking about it. But that's not geographical.

You need a whole set of options, choices, and battles—which would be very hard for me to imagine if that face had to be the key to the story. He's far beyond happiness, far beyond sorrow, too. Patience, wisdom, and grace. Kind of distilled. A reconciliation. It's a kind of union, a kind of tranquility—which is not Western.

CAMEROON STOOL

I love this. There is a sense of continuity—and not only between the figures. *Everything* is connected, holding up—it's being held *together* and also being held *up*. Again, it's another space and another time. It's not a Western idea. The whole thing is informed by the phallus. The faces of the children are really unreadable in some ways. From the Western point of view, it would be called grotesque. But it's very powerful. And finally, very true. I'm again talking about another space and time. This comes from a language which I'm still trying to excavate. I come from there too. It's an affirmation of the fact that the world is round and that we are all connected and that nothing ever dies.

The Western idea of childhood, or children, is not at all the same idea of childhood that produced me. To put it very brutally—to exaggerate it a little bit, but not much: white people think that childhood is a rehearsal for success. White people think of themselves as safe. But black people raise their children as a rehearsal for danger. In this piece, there's a connection between them—everyone of them is facing, they're turning around, they're all looking out. But they aren't protecting themselves; they protect each other. They're joined, but each one is alone too. They are all facing out differently. It's not like Mt. Rushmore—everybody looking either at the north or south. *They're* looking at the world. Each one sees a part of it depending on where he is. The world is round and everything is connected. They have a tremendous humility and a tremendous energy—they have that in common. It's very affirmative.