

THE ART OF SUSANNE WENGER

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THE tendency among modern European artists is increasingly towards total disengagement, non-commitment to any cause. The tachists, in fact, who believe themselves to constitute the "avant garde" of modern painting, have reached a point where they painfully try to relieve their art of any content at all. The artist must not make any sort of statement with his art; he must try to exclude any thinking process from his work in order to let the hand alone produce a result. It seems clear, however, that in many cases a very deliberate effort of the will has to be made to achieve this state of bliss, and the result is only too often sterile and invertebrate.

It is extremely refreshing, therefore, to come across one of the few artists who have developed their own very personal style far removed from the dictates of current fashion.

Such a one is the Austrian painter Susanne Wenger, who has been living in Nigeria for nine years. Her work has a vigour and vitality that it is difficult to find in Europe nowadays, and the artist jubilantly admits her debt to Africa in this respect. Not that she has been influenced directly by African *art*. It is African *life* that has nourished her imagination. Susanne Wenger says that in Europe she felt continually frustrated because the artist no longer forms part of society there, but seems to be working *against* it most of the time. In Africa she has been able to become part of a community. For many years now she has been living in a Yoruba village in Western Nigeria. She is a fluent speaker of the extremely difficult Yoruba language and has absorbed much of the philosophy of this ancient culture. Her spontaneous grasp of Yoruba symbolism astonished her new friends and she was given a high title and senior place in the cult of Obatala, the Yoruba creator god, whose shrines it is now part of her work to decorate. Although her work is so completely different from indigenous woodcarving and provides a startling aesthetic experience for the Yoruba people, they nevertheless recognize a certain affinity of spirit in her murals and consider them a service rendered to the god. The women dance on the completion of each new work.

Apart from the murals, she is working mainly in an African



“batik” technique at the moment. This consists of painting on textile with cassava starch. The starch acts as a dye resist after drying; and when the cloth is dipped into a dark indigo vat, the painted areas remain white. Later the starch is removed and the cloth is dipped very lightly once more. Thus in the end the drawing appears in a light greenish-blue on a dark purplish background. This technique is used by Yoruba women to produce wrappers, which are decorated with geometric designs. Seldom do they venture into figurative representations, although sometimes highly stylized lizards, snakes and birds appear. Susanne Wenger has adapted this technique to produce enormous wall hangings depicting the stories of the Yoruba gods. She does not, however, “illustrate” Yoruba mythology in a literal sense of the word. Rather she creates large compositions inspired by and making use of the symbolism of Yoruba religion. These cloths are striking because of their intensity of feeling, their agitated movement, and the general impression of wild power controlled by disciplined form.

It matters little whether we are interested in the particular philosophy that provides the source of power for these works of art. After all, we may be excited by Giotto, even if Christianity has no appeal to us. What is important is that these things mattered to the artist; that here is the rare example of a modern artist whose art is still related to her life.

Susanne Wenger once said to me: “Now that I have so much to say, I have ceased to think about the form.” In much modern European art the perfection of form has become an end in itself. As a result art has often degenerated into an experiment. Not being nourished by life itself, it is invertebrate, abstract and ultimately irrelevant. It is precisely because she felt this situation so frustrating, that Susanne Wenger made her home in Africa. Here she can make her art grow from the content. Here her form grows perfect *because* it is only a means to an end.

It is a tribute also to Yoruba culture that it has been able to provide an important and significant artist like Susanne Wenger with inspiration and a spiritual home.

