

HISTORY AND CHANGE  
Arts Council, African Studies Association  
Annual Meeting, College Art Association, Boston, February 12, 1987

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**Preface: Picasso on African Art**

Before beginning my comments, I want to waylay a ghost by reading a passage from André Malraux's book, called *The Obsidian Head*, in which he quotes an account by Picasso of his attitude toward primitive art.

"Everybody always talks about the influences that the Negroes had on me. What can I do? We all of us loved fetishes. Van Gogh once said, 'Japanese art—we all had that in common.' For us it's the Negroes. Their forms had no more influence on me than they had on Matisse. Or on Derain. But for them the masks were just like any other pieces of sculpture. When Matisse showed me his first Negro head, he talked to me about Egyptian art.

"When I went to the old Trocadéro, it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell. I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood that it was very important: something was happening to me, right?

"The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. But why weren't the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean? We hadn't realized it. Those were primitives, not magic things. The Negro pieces were *intercesseurs*, mediators; ever since then I've known the word in French. They were against everything—against unknown, threatening spirits. I always looked at fetishes. I understood; I too am against everything. I too believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! Everything! Not the details—women, children, babies, tobacco, playing—but the whole of it! I understood what the Negroes used their sculpture for. Why sculpt like that and not some other way? After all, they weren't Cubists! Since Cubism didn't exist. It was clear that some guys had invented the models, and others had imitated them, right? Isn't that what we call tradition? But all the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. They're tools. If we give spirits a form, we become independent. Spirits, the unconscious (people still weren't talking about

that very much), emotion—they're all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism-painting—yes absolutely!

"That's also what separated me from Braque. He loved the Negro pieces, but as I told you: because they were good sculptures. He was never at all afraid of them. Exorcism didn't interest him. Because he wasn't affected by what I called 'the whole of it,' or life, or—I don't know—the earth ?—everything that surrounds us, everything that is not us—he didn't find all of that hostile. And imagine—not even foreign to him! He was always at home... Even now ... He doesn't understand these, things at all: he's not superstitious! (Malraux, André, *La tête d'obsidienne*, Paris, 1974, 17-19; Guicharnaud, June, and Jacques Guicharnaud, *Picasso's Mask* André Malraux, New York, 1976, 10-13)

It is clear that whatever has been said about the superficiality and mere formality of the relationships between modern art and primitive art, Picasso's interest was certainly not merely formal or aesthetic. On the contrary, he explicitly rejects that view of primitive art which he thinks of as essentially magical, ritualistic, exorcistic. Whatever we may think about the validity of his attitude, Picasso did not think of primitive art as a kind of cubism *avant la lettre*, but because of a powerful, affective meaning that he believed lay behind its visual form. And, it was on this level of meaning that he drew the analogy with his own work, which he described as an exorcism—a warding off, a doing away with, and he distinguishes himself from Matisse and Braque precisely by his own superstition and sense of magic. We are all free to imagine exactly what ghosts Picasso was exorcising. My own view is that they were precisely the ghosts of formalism, the academic conventions to which the entire Western tradition of naturalism in art had led. This is the only way I think Picasso's passionate and moving statement about primitive art can be understood and two things emerge from it with crystal clarity. Picasso's interest was not merely formalistic, he did have a profound sense of the meaning of primitive art and his attitude was anything but supercilious or condescending. Now it is entirely possible that our modern anthropological, sociological, art-historical research may have led us to question whether African art is indeed exorcistic, ritualistic, superstitious. If those words do not express its meaning, then what words do?

There was a fascinating testimony to the idea of man as the art-making animal recently with the results of Jane Goodall's work on the social life of the chimpanzee. Goodall showed that chimpanzees actually do use tools as well as weapons. She filmed a chimpanzee picking up a stick and using it as a club to drive off an enemy. In another instance, the chimpanzee picked up a twig and stuck it into an anthill. The ants adhered to it as he drew it out and he had a nice snack. But, not only did the chimpanzee use the tools, he actually made them—in one instance by pulling a twig off a tree and stripping off its leaves so that it would slip more easily into the hole in the anthill. Shown these results, the famous paleontologist, Leakey, he commented that her work necessitated a fundamental reorientation of our ideas about ourselves. Either we shall have to stop defining man as the tool-making animal, or we shall have to enlarge our definition of ourselves to include the chimpanzee. I think Leakey is absolutely right, and the key to the solution of the problem lies in the fact that the chimpanzee merely *made* his tools, he did not *fashion* it as human beings have done from the very first stone implements. The difference between the chimpanzee and the human being lies precisely in the elusive but fundamental difference between making and fashioning.

### **On the 'Primitive' in African Art**

I would like to preface my remarks with a word about the genesis of the triple symposium on "Art without History" that gave rise to this meeting. Originally, three distinct proposals had been made to Jeffrey Muller, the program chairman: Whitney Davis had proposed a session on prehistoric art; Jonathan Fineberg was to chair a session on the interest of modern artists in children's art; and when Professor Muller asked me for suggestions for a symposium, I proposed one that would focus on all those kinds of human creations that we tend to classify outside the domain of High Art, including children's and prehistoric art, and their appreciation in modern times. The three ideas were quite independent, and when I heard of the other two I immediately proposed that they be combined under the general rubric we have labeled "Art without History." My



point in telling you this minor bit of art-historical history is to indicate that, although my two colleagues accepted the proposal enthusiastically, and we have worked together in full cooperation and agreement, I, not they, am primarily responsible for the over-arching theme to which your group takes exception.

Not being an Africanist, obviously I cannot comment on the substance of what has been said in these talks, except to acknowledge that I have learned a great deal about African art—the way it reflects the needs of African society, the way it changes over time, the kinds of meaning it conveys. As a non-Africanist I can, however, comment on what has not been said—practically nothing has been said about the character of African art itself. What is African about African art? Some would argue, I am sure, that this is a meaningless question—African art is infinitely rich and various. Indeed, give or take a little, much of what has been said here about the works themselves could be applied to the arts of any other region or historical context, including Western Europe; and I suppose the point has been to show that in some respects African art is no different from other, putatively more sophisticated arts, and hence deserves the same kind of attention and appreciation. In other respects, however, it seems to me different, and its interests—that is, our efforts to understand it—are ill-served by denying, neglecting or obscuring that difference.

If I asked you to identify the origin of an unknown work from Africa, chances are your answer would be right; and your chances would be far better than mine. Whether you recognize it or not, there is implicit in the very nature of your organization and your professional expertise a unitarian conception of Africa that is not only geographical but also cultural. Just as you use the terms "Western" or "European" with more than

topographical meaning, so your term "African" refers to something more than a piece of landscape. Yet, I have the impression that in your wholly understandable effort to defend your territory you tend to discover the diversity of the trees, but lose sight of the unity of the forest.

The difference seems to me apparent even in those arts of Africa that seem at first glance to be least African (**Figs. 1, 2**). I refer to the magnificent sculptured masks and heads produced by the Yoruba of Ife in Nigeria between the 12th and the 15th Century A.D., in copper, brass, and terra-cotta. The sculptures, of which sixteen have been preserved in metal, were the subject of an admirable study by Susanne Blier in *The Art Bulletin* in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The Ife sculptures, as everyone recognizes, are unique in Africa for their astonishing naturalism and remarkable materials and technique.

Scholars have observed that this naturalism is not thorough-going. More or less radical stylizations are evident in the treatment of the eyes, the ears, and especially the neck—the connecting link par excellence; rather than suggesting an organic transition to the body, the neck has been sliced off and given a cylindrical form with annular creases comparable to the parallel patterned scarification on some of the faces (**Figs. 3, 4**). Frank Willett thought that the heads might have been attached to wooden mannequins for use in funeral rites, an idea to be compared with the late medieval royal effigies of the West (cf. **Fig. 1; Fig 5**).<sup>2</sup> Professor Blier suggested that they were used in coronation ceremonies and associated the sculptures with the deified ruler Obalufon the Second and the legendary founders of the sixteen Yoruba city states. As independent heads, they remind me of the sculptured "imagines," as they were called, used by the Romans in their

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, Kings, Crowns, and Rights of Succession: Obalufon Arts at Ife and Other Yoruba Centers, *Art Bulletin*, v1 67 no. 3, 1985, 383-401.

<sup>2</sup> Willett, Frank, *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*, London, 1967

ancestral cults; or the head reliquaries (**Fig. 6**), "busts," as they were called, which, along with foot reliquaries, arm reliquaries, finger reliquaries and the like, filled the church treasuries of medieval Europe. (**Fig. 7**) However they are understood, it is also clear that the Ife sculptures, for all their naturalism, are not realistic portraits: although the physiognomies differ, they all represent the same age of flourishing maturity and the same physical type of fulsome beauty. In a word, they represent ideal forms—disembodied spirits, as it were—in which nature has been assimilated to some supra-, or super-, or preternatural vision. In this sense they do not seem so different, after all, from the more familiar kinds of African head and mask sculptures.

Considered in this light, it is not surprising—though it does not seem to have been observed—what happened when the Ife artists put head and body together (**Figs. 8, 9**), as it were, in certain small-size portrayals of single or paired figures (**Fig. 10**). The heads of mature individuals are placed on bodies that are relatively small and short-limbed, with swollen abdomens, weak arms and thick legs—the bodies of dwarves or, what amounts to the same thing, of children. A similarly strange combination of adult heads with child-like bodies had also occurred in the West in late antiquity—for example, in the famous paired porphyry sculptures of the tetrarchic Roman emperors, at the end of the 3rd Century A.D. An attempt was made then to counteract the tendency of the far-flung empire to disintegrate—a tendency many contemporary critics attributed to the corruption and hyper-sophistication of Roman society—by uniting the provinces into four regions under two pairs of rulers with equal authority (**Fig. 11**). These extraordinary images represent a major break with the classical tradition of harmony and grace that had dominated ancient art for centuries, as seen in the charming Hellenistic groups of Cupid

and Psyche, whose slightly cloying sweetness and affectation had expressed the sentiment of spiritual union. Of particular interest in our context is the history of the attitudes of historians in their efforts to deal with this discomfiting development. At first, they attributed it to a decline in the late empire of standards of taste and quality of workmanship; it was bad art, made by incompetent artists. More recently, the phenomenon has been explained as a reflection of the "popularization" or "provincialization" of the empire—referring to the perennial non-classical or pre-classical traditions preserved through the ages in the popular arts of the urban masses, and in the so-called "barbaric" societies of the outlying provinces. These indigenous traditions would have been revived and adopted at the highest levels of authority to evoke the simple, unvitiated values of the early founders of Rome, and to express a universal, communal spirit joining the empire together—analogueous to the political effect augured by the tetrarchic system itself.

If this new view has any merit, then the analogy with the Ife sculptures may be more than an accidental affinity, since both would reflect a common cultural substratum operating to transform the classical heritage of naturalism in accordance with a preternatural vision (see **Fig. 9**). A hint of the nature of this vision is suggested by the notions of cyclical time and circular history developed by anthropologists as a way of understanding certain so-called primitive societies, and adopted by Susan Vogel in her discussion of the Baule masks.<sup>3</sup> Susannne Blier's concept of innovation and renovation is analogueous (Danxomean). The Ife sculptures seem to me precisely to embody a sense of perennial renewal, an everlasting rite of passage in which ideal infancy and perfect maturity are merged.

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<sup>3</sup> Vogel, Susan Mullin, *Baule Art as the Expression of a World View*, 1977.

This seems to me a great and awesome achievement (see **Fig. 8**). In so far as it is great, I am offended by the patronizing arrogance of those who would presume to defend this art, especially by pointing out that it is subject to change and expresses ideas and reflects a sense of time. How could it be otherwise, since it is made by human beings like ourselves? In so far as I describe it as awesome, I am expressing something of the sense of humiliation I feel before these works, as though I had been bitten by some malignant serpent of self-knowledge which tends to exclude me from that magic circle of thought they seem to embody. For, in the end, what are such notions as cyclicity, circularity, innovation and renovation, but representations to ourselves of an ultimately timeless frame of reference in which we conceive these works to have been conceived? Conversely, the very fact that we invent such notions indicates that we are aware of ourselves as being outside the frame of reference they define.

I also submit, with due respect, that these notions are but equivalents in temporal terms to the notion of "primitive" in cultural terms. They all suggest a special state of mind, perhaps best defined as a kind of intelligent unselfconsciousness, which is more or less obscure to us and which we contemplate with a mixture of wonder and despair.

This is not to say that there can be no communication across the gaps of time, space and culture that separate us from these works; on the contrary, there is a level, perhaps more instinctual than rational, on which they are linked to one another and to us. It is as though the Roman as well as the African sculptors had distilled and concentrated the gentle human affection expressed by Cupid and Psyche, into some deep and powerful binding force of nature (**Fig. 12**). Moreover, whether consciously or not, Brancusi seems to me to have recaptured a measure of this primitive life force in the embracing blocks of

stone he called "The Kiss." I use the term primitive here advisedly, because so far as I am aware no one has yet invented a better way to describe the elemental response such works inspire in us, and the elusive quality of authenticity we find in them.





Fig. 1 Ife zinc brass head (AB 1985, p. 384)

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Fig. 2 Ife copper head

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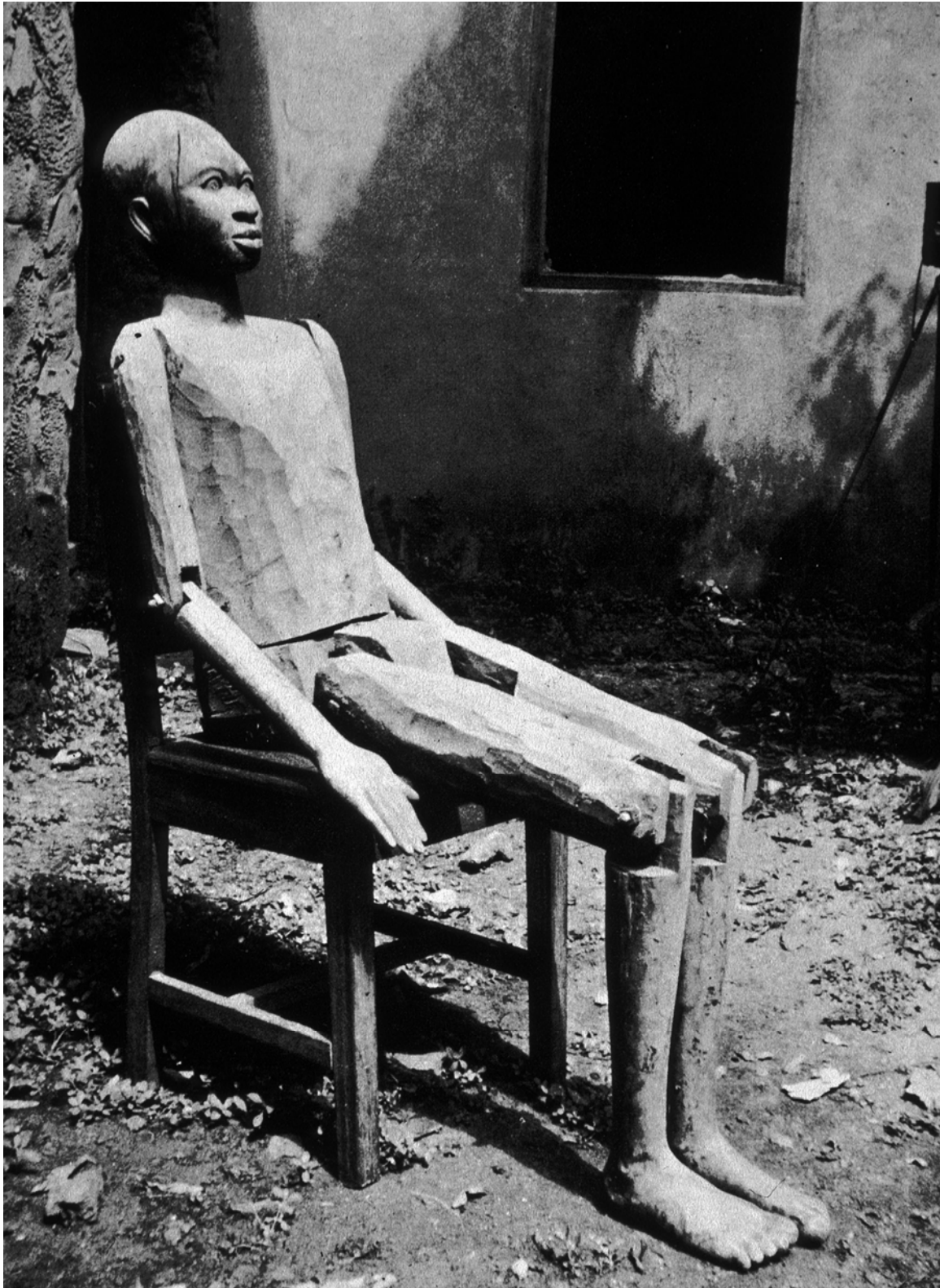


Fig. 3 Queen Olashubude (Willett, fig. 2)

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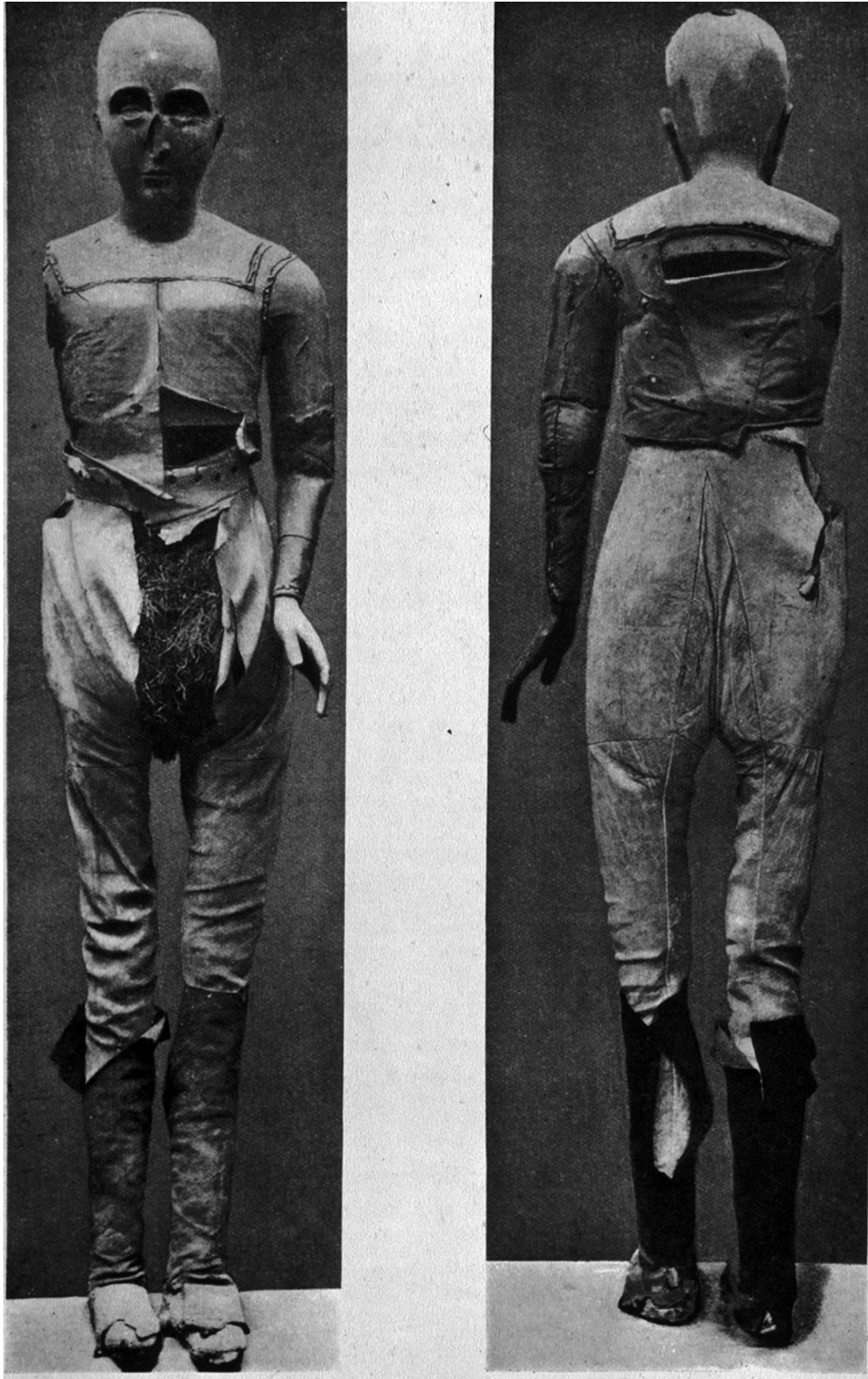


Fig. 4 Effigy of Elizabeth of York (*Archaeologia*, 1907, pl. LX)

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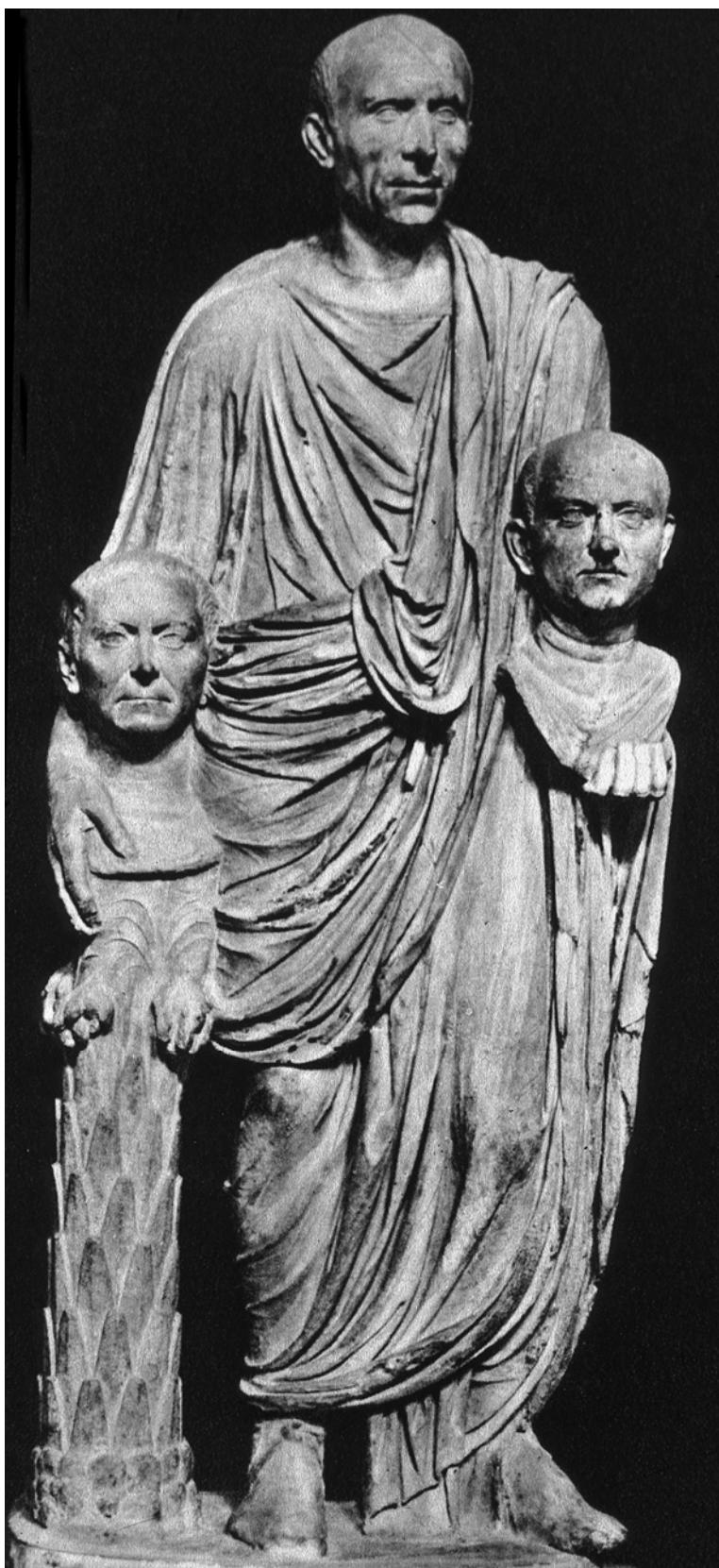


Fig. 5 Roman figure with 2 heads. Musei Capitolini, Rome (Janson survey, fig. 223)  
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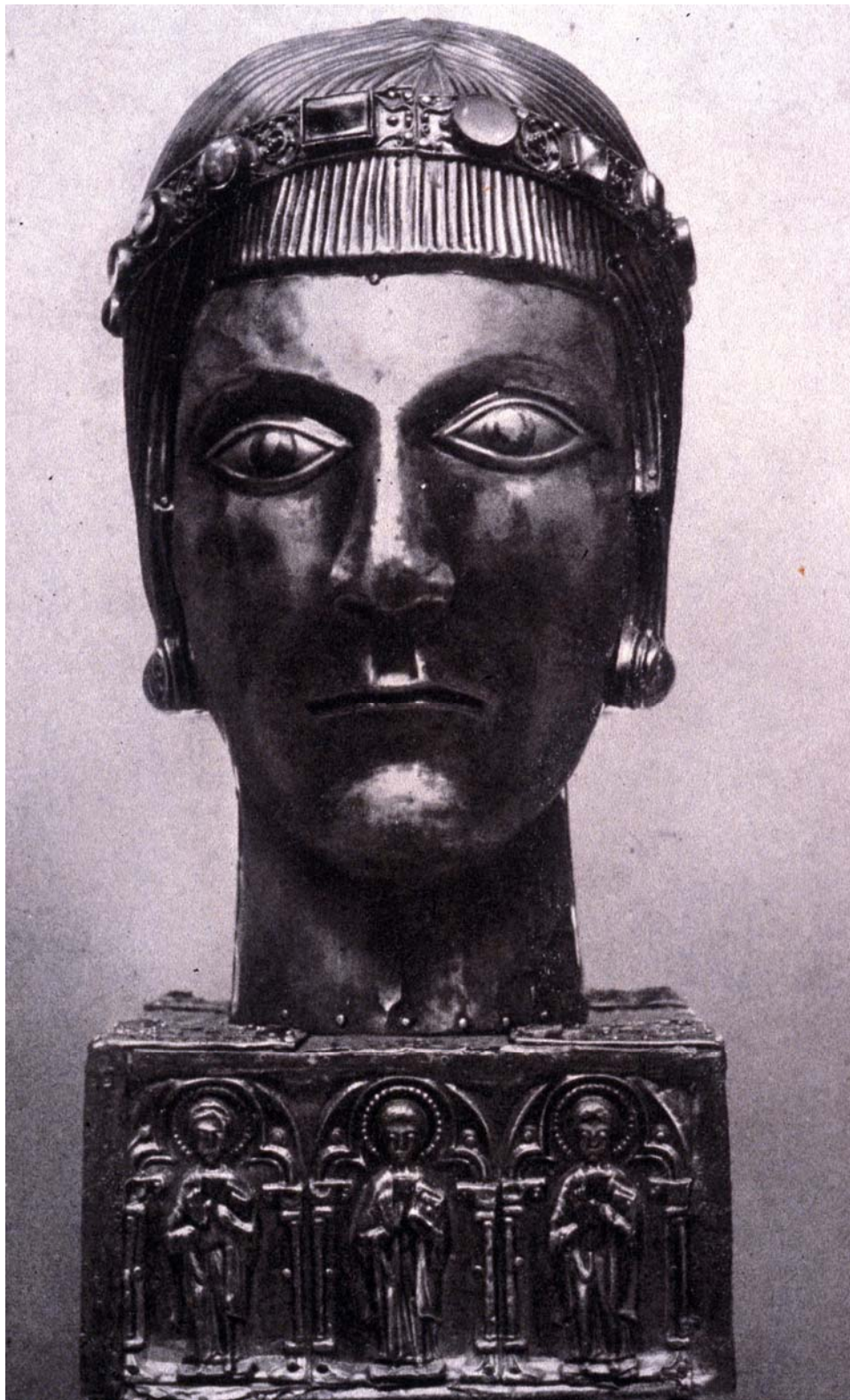


Fig. 6 Head of St. Eustace. Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
(Kovacs. *Kopfreliquien*, pl. 6)

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Fig. 7 Ife terra-cotta head (Lajuwa) (AB 1985, p. 394

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Fig. 8 Ife brass king (AB 1985, p. 395)

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Fig. 9 An Oni and his Queen (front view) (Willett, Ife, fig.10)

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Fig. 10 Portrait, male, Tetrarchs, 300 AD. Vatican, Rome (Wegner, Diokletian L'Orange, 1985, tav. 5b)

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Fig. 11 Cupid and Psyche. Uffizi, Florence (Mansuelli cat., fig. 54)

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**Fig. 12 Constantin Brancusi, The Kiss, 1912, limestone. Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia**

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