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Celebrating 175: Research File, Coleman, Floyd, circa 1975-1991

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PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN INFLUENCE IN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE CARIBBEAN: A DYNAMIC CULTURAL MOSAIC

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The Caribbean is a complex mosaic of cultures shaped by the exigencies of fifteenth century mercantilism - manifest specifically in the quest for gold, to create a European economy through the development of agriculture and minimal agriculturally-related manufacturing using first European, Indian and subsequently African slave labor, and establishing hegemony over the seas to ensure profitable trade monopolies creating the wealth that propelled the engine of the cultural efflorescence called the Renaissance. Taking its name from the Caribs who, along with other Indian groups, inhabited the archipelago, Honduras, Guatemala and Belize, and the northern part of South America, the Caribbean has been defined geographically, culturally and geopolitically in various ways. In geopolitical terms - expressed in the actions and pronouncements of the Reagan administration - the region has been defined as the Caribbean Basin, including all of the countries that border the Caribbean Sea, however excluding Cuba, Grenada, Guyana, and the United States. Others would perhaps set the geographical parameters within a core or perhaps a nuclear Caribbean - excluding South America except Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and excluding Guatemala and Honduras, but including Belize. In this essay, we will focus on the Caribbean as a cultural region that is like the Dogon notion of the spiral-egg, which has its epicenter in Hispaniola, but has spread to virtually all of the countries that border the Caribbean Sea and to cities on the North American mainland such as New Orleans, Miami, Washington, D.C., New York, and across the Atlantic to London, Paris and other centers. The area of the Caribbean Basin is a dynamic cultural region whose influence on world culture has been considerable, although such pronounced influence has not been generally recognized. Despite the geographical, political and ethnic diversity, the Caribbean has a distinct cultural core which has informed the creative expressions of the people from the seventeenth century until the present.

It has been the African influence that created a degree of uniformity, despite the variations and diversity that exist in the Caribbean. European ideology and cultural interests have no doubt been influential, but viable artistic expression in the Caribbean did not stem from Europe. The African and Indian cultures formed the foundation on which the artistic expressions of the Caribbean blossomed and achieved their voice.

However, in this essay we will be concerned primarily with the African roots, the survivals, the conscious efforts to link the Caribbean to Africa and to view it as an important part of the African diaspora. We now turn to look very briefly at some of the characteristics of traditional African art and culture and how these characteristics have been continued or transformed in the New World.

The Cultural Foundations of African Art

In African thought, emphasis is placed on collective well being of the group rather than on the individual. Art produced within such a culture has considerable importance, because it helps to maintain a balance among mankind, nature, and the supernatural realm. Art helps to link the present to the past and the individual to the group. Temporal singularity



gives way to the generic and symbolic which reflect the larger social order.

The African artist creates images that inculcate a system of values that are consistent with his cultural group. There is an abiding concern for continuity. Coherence is demanded and is realized in the "mutual compatibility" concept explicit in Yoruba thought, but can be seen throughout Africa. This is not unlike the concern for interdependence and complementarity that has been invoked in discussions of ancestor figures, such as the primordial couples of the Dogon, and the mother and child sculptures that are frequently found throughout West and Central Africa. Religion in Africa is omnipresent. This concern for the spiritual permeates African life; consequently, a line of demarcation cannot be strictly drawn between the religious and non-religious realms. There is a symbiotic relationship between African art and religion: the study of one illuminates the other. Unlike the Western Christian religion, African religion is not God-centered, but is human-centered. Hence, a religion prevails that

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