



Sino-African Art Exchange — Exploring Wang Keping's Sculptural Art

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Abstract: As humanistic exchanges between China and Africa continue to deepen, African art has become more widespread in China, providing inspiration for artists' creations in particular. Wang Keping was one of the earliest artists to be influenced by African art, drawing on the qualities and spirit of African art and combining it with traditional Chinese culture and personal concepts to form his own unique style, expanding the diversity of China's early artistic styles while promoting artistic exchanges between China and Africa.

Keywords: Chinese and African art, Wang Keping, sculpture

1. Introduction

Chinese and African cultures have been exchanging and learning from each other since ancient times, and there is a deep friendship between the two countries. During the late Qing and Republican periods, ancient Egyptian artworks began to circulate in China and people began to gain an initial understanding of African art. After the founding of New China, with the signing of the first cultural agreement between China and Africa, cultural and artistic exchanges and cooperation between China and Africa took off, and a large number of African artworks entered the national scene. The spread of African artworks in China brought freshness to the art world at the time, and also inspired a group of artists to draw inspiration from African art, feeding fresh blood into the Chinese art scene. As humanistic exchanges between China and Africa continued to intensify, the spread of African art in China not only raised the general public's awareness of African art, but also provided inspiration for artists to create. They draw on the qualities and spirit of African art and combine it with traditional Chinese culture, or personal concepts, to present a rich variety of works that have opened up new horizons for the Chinese art scene. Wang Keping's wood carvings are among the typical representatives.

2. The germination of Wang Keping's artistic style

As one of the pioneers of Chinese contemporary art, it was his sculptures at the Stars Art Exhibition that left a brilliant mark on Chinese art history, making a breakthrough in what was then a 'dusty' art scene in China. The artist who influenced him the most was Brancusi, who was inspired by African masks and sculptures to create simple, rugged and highly individual figures. This undoubtedly had a profound influence on Wang Keping as well, resulting in his work reflecting his understanding of life and nature and a series of explorations between the material and the spiritual, the natural and the simple.

Apart from the influence of African art on Wang Keping's work, the uniqueness of his work came from the rebellious spirit in his bones and the political environment of China at the time. He was a 'maverick' from an early age, not joining the Young Pioneers in primary school, not joining the league in secondary school, and not joining the Party in the army, and he was never constrained by rules and regulations. This rebellious spirit is also evident in his creations. Wang Keping's first sculpture, "Long live" (as shown in Figure 1) depicts a peculiar figure with arms sprouting from his head and holding up a small red book. The work's face is twisted and distorted, and its pained expression can be seen as it opens its mouth wide as if to cry out. Wang Keping's sculptural technique and peculiar shape was unprecedented in China at the time. He used this nonsensical image to satirise the numbness and distortion of the people during the Cultural Revolution of the time.

Wang Keping's rebellion's not only evident in his first works, but also in the strong political overtones of most of his early works. At the first Stars Art Exhibition, Wang Keping attracted great attention at the time for the unique forms and intriguing artistic features of his sculptures. The strong political nature of his works speaks for itself, for example, "Silence" (Figure 2), is a work in which only the head's carved, but the face's quite richly formed. The mottled wood gives the carving a heavy sense of history, and the mouth of the figure is most unusual in that it's shaped in accordance with the original wood, using the scar of the tree as a gagged mouth, and the eyes of the statue are shown as crossed lines carved with a knife, as if they were blindfolded by a seal, as a way of attacking the 'Gang of Four' at the time for the closed-door, hoodwinking behaviour. This is an attack on the "Gang of Four" for the seclusion and hoodwinking of the nation. Wang Keping's early works have already unconsciously embodied the combination of nature and concept, a primitive nature and

concept, a primitive meaning that is quite reminiscent of African wood carving and represents the traditional Chinese concept of the pursuit of nature.



Figure 1. Long live



Figure 2. Silence

3. The establishment of Wang Keping's artistic style

As time went on, the political overtones in Wang Keping's work waned, and the wood carving became more simple, natural and soft, unlike the absurdity and exaggeration of his initial forms. But he never stopped rebelling; he changed from rebelling against politics to rebelling against popular, vulgar artistic trends. He always expressed his thoughts, criticisms and interventions on the reality of social life in an artistic way.

Wang Keping's personal characteristics, life experiences, aesthetics and personal creative ability have determined his pursuit of simplicity in his artistic career. In his view, simplicity is abstraction. From the beginning, all the five senses were present, but gradually they were omitted, and finally even the concrete shapes were eliminated. Wang Keping is constantly subtracting from his art, pursuing simplification in modelling. This is why Wang Keping fell in love with African carvings and wood carvings as soon as he saw them, and was drawn to their simplicity, generosity, ruggedness and spontaneity of form. It is this original simplicity and roughness of African sculpture that keeps him coming back for more. The voluptuous female figures under his carving knives are also most representative, with simplified torsos and exaggerated female genitalia reminiscent of the primitive artwork Venus of Willendorf and the female figures in primitive African art, which are both erotic and blended with dynamism and vitality to show the greatness, femininity and beauty of women.

Wang Keping's pursuit of 'simplicity' is not only the result of his infection from African masks and wood carvings, but also the profound influence of Taoist thought on the pursuit of nature in his bones as a Chinese. It is also Wang's pursuit of 'simplicity' that has led to a series of 'serendipities' in his work. From the search for wood to the shaping of the pieces, the creation of Wang Keping's work is marked by serendipity. For example, the series of 'Mouths' was born out of Wang Keping's accidental discovery that 'tree holes' have the desire to speak, eat and have sex. The sculpture 'Three Metres x Four Tons', which is still standing in the Seoul Olympic International Sculpture Park, is also unique in that Wang Keping kept the natural, uneven lump of the tree trunk.

Wang Keping's study of African art does not only stop at borrowing from external forms, but is also reflected in the intense works that are full of emotions that he had to let out from his heart, a creation that resembles the infinite enthusiasm and shock brought by the primitive impulse of African art. Van Gogh was also influenced by African wood carvings to create Sunflowers, which, like Wang Keping's work, represents a passionate life form and abundant vitality, making people emotionally vulnerable to fluctuations.

4. Summary

African art has not only had a profound influence on Wang Keping, but has also contributed greatly to the development of our national art. African art has crossed regional and cultural differences influencing many artists around the world, Picasso, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and many others. These masters were not only struck by the simplicity and ruggedness of African mask carvings, but also by the abundant enthusiasm and simple energy represented behind African art.

Civilisations are enriched by interaction, and civilisations are enriched by mutual appreciation. The mutual exchange and appreciation of culture and art between China and Africa is a great force for the progress and development of human civilization and art. Nowadays, due to the diversification of the subjects of international communication, the forms of expression of China-Africa art exchange will also become more and more diversified, and the flower of China-Africa friendship will eventually bloom in full and continue to be gorgeous. The two countries have a platform for two-way exchanges, so that the people of China and Africa can use the humanities and the arts to gain a better understanding of China and Africa, and thus plant the seeds of friendship.

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