



AFRICA IN THE LIFE AND WORK (ABOVE ALL) OF BEDŘICH FORMAN

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This volume of Annals of the Náprstek Museum, like a contemporary exhibition, is dedicated only to the life long career of the graphic designer, photographer and collector Bedřich Forman (1919–1985). On this occasion we cannot omit to mention his brother Werner's influence and participation in Bedřich's many activities. In the case of other cultures and other continents the cooperation of both was possibly not so remarkable, but in the case of African cultures, it was not possible to speak about one without mentioning the other. That is, why I introduce "above all" in the title of my article.

As we can judge from the Náprstek museum archives, more exactly from the archive of the African collection, Africa attracted the interest of both Forman brothers at the end of the forties in last century. Specially Werner Forman often visited the museum and took photos of the collections in those days. Up to now, in the photo-archive of the museum, are kept glass negatives representing African spoons¹, wooden vessels, masks and sculptures in the dramatic play of lights and shadows. Some of them later appeared in the representative publication of Artia publishers of "The Art of four continents"², which was gradually translated into in many languages. The Náprstek museum was not the exclusive owner of the important African collections in Czechoslovakia of those days, so while preparing the abovementioned book the Forman brothers asked for the cooperation of the writer Joe Hloucha (1881–1957), apparently the most important Czech collector of Non-European art.

Hloucha's diary, dated 4th March 1950, says: "... unannounced the photographer Forman and bought Bapende mask of devil shape for 3 000,-Kcs"³. From May of the same year began the regular collaboration between the Forman brothers and Hloucha – they borrowed his masks for taking photos and occasionally bought some pieces. For example on 21st May 1950, they bought two weapons from Central Africa, on 17th April

¹ Náprstek Museum bought a collection of spoons in 1951–2, Werner Forman immediately did photo documentation.

² Hájek 1956.

³ Sign. Hloucha 12/4–6. Mask was published in "Art of four continents", I, fig. 56.

1951, the Batak woodcarving, on 20th June 1952, they were given a comb from Angola⁴, on 26th November 1954, they bought a set of four items of Asian and African origin, on 22nd December 1954, they acquired four Ashanti brass weights⁵. From his diary, we see that the most intensive cooperation went on during 1954, when Hloucha designated the photographs of his African pieces and at the same time wrote a chapter about African tribal art for "Art of four continents"⁶. During 1954 Joe Hloucha sold all his collection the Náprstek museum. The inventory contained 7 504 pieces and with that Joe Hloucha practically closed his career as a collector. After that the Forman brothers had to look for other sources for their purchases.

Collecting and photographing of African wooden carvings were not the only interest of Bedřich and Werner Forman. Within their professions they were also interested in the age and function of African wooden carvings. For example the examination of the Senufo wooden horse-rider from the collections of Náprstek museum (Inv. N° 39.088) by infra-red rays they found, that the sculpture was painted or covered in the past with red geometrical designs⁷. They proved clearly that it was not a carving made as a souvenir for sale to Europeans.

In "Art of four continents" some items of African origin from both brothers' collections were published. In addition from that Bedřich Forman wrote the introduction to the chapter of "African applied art"⁸.

The success of the book "Art of four continents" and continued cooperation with the publishing house Artia, of which the Forman brothers Forman were distinctive and founder members influenced their future. It gave Bedřich Forman and his brother the opportunity to travel overseas and therefore to open direct way of studying Non-European cultures.

In 1957 the brothers visited Cairo and in the nearby village Harrania discovered the centre of the manufacture of woven carpets, made by local children. Thanks to the cooperation with the Egyptian ethnographer Ramses Wisa Wassef, they published this discovery in the book "Blumen der Wüste" (1961) and so these weavers and their colourful vision of the world became world-famous.⁹

During the 1950s and 1960s the brothers Forman visited several times Egypt – they were preparing the book dedicated to ancient Egyptian art¹⁰ and during one of those trips Bedřich Forman acquired a few fragments of the medieval ceramics.¹¹ In the same way, he acquired probably the other items of his collection. For example at the end of the 1950s Bedřich Forman participated in an archaeological and ethnographical expedition to the Dogon country (Bandiagara Cliffs) and travelled through the territory of the inner delta of the Niger and through the Upper Volta (present Burkina Faso). From this journey comes the set of the Bambara puppets manipulated from below¹², which appears during the theatrical performances in the Segou region. By visiting the Dogon country Forman

⁴ Comb was published in "Art of four continents", I, fig. 80.

⁵ Brass weights were published in "Art of four continents", I, 82–86, fig. 82–86.

⁶ Hloucha 1956, 57–58,

⁷ Forman 1949–1950, 274–275; "Art of four continents", pp. 108, 113.

⁸ Forman 1956, 81–86.

⁹ In 1968 issued as "Tapestries from Egypt"; second and enlarged edition was translated into several ¹⁰languages during 1972–1973.

¹⁰ Vilímková 1961.

¹¹ Cat. nos. 60.251–60.256.

¹² Cat. nos. 6.939 and 59.959.



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enriched his collection with a set of fragments of cotton fabrics accoutrement from the burial equipment¹³, a set of fragments of grave pottery¹⁴ and some wooden carvings¹⁵. It seems also, that the Bambara cotton fabrics¹⁶ and the Kurumba antelope wooden mask¹⁷ were acquired during this journey.

From the fifties until the seventies, Bedřich Forman and his brother witnessed the birth of many books about African art. Most of them belonged to the fundamental change outlook on the subject of African cultures. It is possible to mention the work "Afro-Portuguese Ivories" (1959), in which William Fagg, the curator of the British Museum, dated and located the collections of the ivory carvings spread over the European museums and cabinets of curiosities for the first time. These were made between 1490 and 1600 in the workshops of Western Africa, i.e. in Sierra Leone and Western Nigeria. "Benin Art" (1960) by Philip Dark concentrated again on the Africanists's attention to the late medieval art of West African country. Thanks to the cooperation with Basil Davidson, the book "Africa, History of a Continent (1966) was written. Both brothers also revealed "to the western world" unknown collections from "Eastern Europe" like "Negro Art" (1969) of Dmitrij Olderogge, where the African collections of Leningrad's (now Petersburg) ethnographical museum¹⁸ were mentioned. In the course of 1970s, new African collections and new documents of ancient and contemporary life of Africans¹⁹, appeared in their books. Bedřich Forman's last contact with the African subject was the cooperation with the author of this article in Czech publication of the book "Africa" (1984).

All his life Bedřich Forman was a member of friends and sponsors of the Náprstek museum. He regularly visited the museum and attended all the openings and exhibitions and occasionally, as a graphic designer, he participated on the modification of posters, catalogues or artistic designs for the exhibitions and also lent his collections to the museum displays. On few occasions, he donated some sets to the Náprstek museum. His wife, Mrs. Ludmila Forman, goes on with this activity to this day.

If we have somehow to distinguish Bedřich Forman's African collection, then we can say that he considered the historical origin and the age of acquired items. He dedicated a lot of attention to the Art of the Ivory Coast, Mali and Burkina Faso, from where come the characteristic past of his collection. The items from the Cameroon, Nigeria and the Republic of Benin consequently indicated the general interest in West African art. The other parts of Africa were represented in the collection by more likely individual and exceptionally beautiful or interesting pieces.

The history of the collection starts by the purchase from Joe Hloucha, from whom Forman bought more African pieces than mentioned in Hloucha's diary. From the second half of 1950s the collection was completed and enriched with the acquisitions and purchases abroad, directly from Africa. Apart from the Indonesian textile set, the African items are apparently the second biggest complete set of Non-European origin, but in reality the second one is older. The collection is the faithful witness not only of the collector's interests, but also of Bedřich Forman's career.

¹³ Cat. nos. A13.687–A13.694.

¹⁴ Cat. nos. A9.209–A9.229.

¹⁵ Cat. nos. 7.371, 60.012.

¹⁶ Cat. no. 8.183.

¹⁷ Cat. no. 60.011.

¹⁸ Czech version was published in the same year.

¹⁹ Atmore + Stacey 1979.

Catalogue of Bedřich Forman's African Collection in Náprstek Museum

The list of items of African origin proves that Bedřich Forman's passion does not take into account his brother Werner's activities. At the same time it is obvious, that on some occasions both brothers shared the collecting and later on visibly merged the collections between them.

Congo Complex:

- 12.076 – Anthropomorphic drinking vessel, wood with natural patina. Bakuba, Congo, H = 21 cm. On the 26th November 1955, bought from Joe Hloucha, who received it in parcel from Belgian Congo on the 3rd December 1938. The parcel was sent by František Uher and Felix Strommer from the advertising motorcycle tour across Africa. It was published in "Art of four continents" (I, 91), showed on exhibitions "Art of Congo" in 1962 and "African art in Czechoslovakia" in 1983. It was bought by NpM²⁰ the same year. Published: Herold 1990, fig. 204. (See photo no. 1)
- 60.013 – Jug, baked clay with polished black surface, both handles decorated with female figures. Mangbetu, Congo, H = 21.5 cm, d = 11.5 cm. Bought from Joe Hloucha, who obtained the jug before the 2nd World War. Bought for NpM in 1989.
- Collection of anthropomorphic ivory carvings, Lega, Congo. I refer to Jana Jiroušková's article, which is dedicated to them.
 1. A13.800 – Carving, ivory, Lega, H = 17 cm.
 2. A13.901 – Carving, ivory, Lega, H = 16.3 cm.
 3. A13.902 – Carving, ivory, Lega, H = 8.8 cm.

Senúfo Complex:

- 8.127 – Female (ancestor) figure, wood with dark brown patina. Senúfo, Korhogo region, Ivory Coast, H = 17.5 cm. Bought for NpM in 1981. Perhaps originally from Joe Hloucha's collection.
- 59.550 – Ceremonial arm-chair, wood with patina. Senúfo, Ivory Coast, H = 68 cm. The first registered owner was the writer Karel Čapek, who exchanged the arm-chair for Joe Hloucha's "fetish from Congo" in May 1930. Bedřich Forman bought the arm-chair from Joe Hloucha and re-sold it to the dramaturge Milan Calábek at the beginning of eighties of the 20th century; from whom NpM obtained it in 1988. Shown on the exhibition "African Art in Czechoslovakia", 1983. Published: Kandert 1984, fig. 104. (See photo no. 2)

Bambara Complex:

- 6.939 – Puppet manipulated from underneath, wood with pigment, textile, representing a horse-rider. Bambara, Segou region, Mali, H = 71 cm. Bought for NpM in 1985. Published: Herold 1990, fig. 12. (See photo no. 3)
- 8.183 – Textile, cotton with mineral and vegetal dyes, sewn from 7 laces. Bambara, Beledugu region, Mali, 122 × 87 cm. Bought for NpM in 1981. Published: Kandert 1984, fig. 96.
- 59.959 – Puppet manipulated from underneath, wood with brown patina, representation of antelope chased by two hyenas, animals marked only with their heads. Bambara, Segou region, Mali, H = 96 cm. Bought for NpM in 1989. Published: Kandert 1984, fig. XXXI. (See photo no. 4)
- Puppet manipulated from underneath, representing male character, wood with patina and pigments, nacreous eyes. Bambara, Segou region, Mali, H = 53 cm. Private coll. Prague.
- Figurative extension to ceremonial staff, wood with patina. Bambara, Mali, H = 38 cm. Private coll. Prague.

Dogon Complex:

- 7.371 – Female (ancestor) figure, wood with black patina, standing figure on the little pedestal, Dogon, Mali, H = 41 cm. Bought for NpM in 1985. (See photo no. 5)

²⁰ "NpM" means the Náprstek museum.



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- 60.012 – Fragment of the mask (superstructure missing), wood with pigments. Facial part is geometrically conventionalized, type “amma ta”. Dogon, Mali, H = 47 cm. Bought for NpM 1989. (See phot no. 6)
- Set of ceramic fragments discovered round Bandiagara Cliffs, territory of Dogon, Mali, parts of grave equipment, before 1900 (?). Bedřich Forman's gift from 1971:
 1. A9.209 – Fragment of a small vessel, reddish brown surface and break, smooth, H = 7.5 cm.
 2. A9.210 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with the print of a mat, 11.5×9 cm.
 3. A9.211 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with the print of a mat, 9.5×9 cm.
 4. A9.212 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a dye, 11.5×11 cm.
 5. A9.213 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a print of a mat, 7.6×7.3 cm.
 6. A9.214 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown break, reddish brown surface and in some spots blacken, decorated with engraved lines and a die, 8×8 cm.
 7. A9.215 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a print of a mat, 7.7×8cm.
 8. A9.216 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface and break, smooth, 10×10 cm.
 9. A9.217 – Fragment of a vessel, reddish brown surface, smooth, reddish brown break, 8.3×9 cm.
 10. A9.218 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with the print of a mat, 8.5×5 cm.
 11. A.9.219 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with the print of a mat, 7.3×6.7 cm.

12. A9.220 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface, reddish brown break, decorated with a print of a mat, 6.5×5.5 cm.
 13. A9.221 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a dye, 5.3×4.5 cm.
 14. A9.222 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with engraved décor, 6.5×4 cm.
 15. A9.223 – Potsherd, black surface, reddish brown break, decorated with a print of mat, 4.3×4.3 cm.
 16. A9.224 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a print of matting, 6×4.5 m.
 17. A9.225 – Potsherd, brown surface, reddish brown break, decorated with a print of matting, 5.7×3 cm.
 18. A9.226 – Potsherd, brown surface, reddish brown break, decorated with a print of matting, 4.2×3.5 cm.
 19. A9.227 – Potsherd, blacken surface, reddish brown break, decorated with a print of matting, 3.2×3.6 cm.
 20. A9.228 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a print of matting, 3.3×3 cm.
 21. A9.229 – Potsherd, reddish brown surface and break, decorated with a print of matting, 4.2×3 cm.
- A.13.687 – Fragment of a basket base, vegetable matting, spiral technique, light yellow patina, Bandiagara Cliffs, Dogon country, Mali, 14.5×13 cm. Part of the grave equipment, 13th–16th century (?). Bedřich Forman's gift from 1971.
 - Set of textile fragments discovered round Bandiagara Cliffs, Dogon territory, Mali, part of the grave equipment, 13th–16th century (?). Bedřich Forman's gift from 1980.
 1. A13.688 – Wool fragment, 21.5×17 cm
 2. A13.689 – Cotton fragment, 15.5×23.5 cm.
 3. A13.690 – Cotton fragment, 23.5×7 cm.
 4. A13.691 – Cotton fragment 14.5×14 cm.
 5. A13.692 a, b – Two cotton fragments, 43.5×8 cm, 41×15 cm.
 6. A13.693 – Cotton fragment 34×20.5 cm.
 7. A13.694 – Wool fragment, 24×19 cm.
 - Male (ancestor) figure, wood with the patina of the cult, Dogon, Mali. H = 35 cm. Private coll. Prague.

Yoruba Complex:

- 59.542 – Wand, wood with a brown patina, figure of kneeling woman combined with a motif of a closed fist. It imitates the ivory carving. Yoruba, Nigeria, H = 28 cm. Bought for NpM in 1989.
- 59.960 – Divining tray, wood with brown patina, oval, elevated edge is decorated with a motif of a face and the three other sides with geometric décor. Yoruba, Nigeria, l = 39.5 cm, w = 26.3 cm. Bought for NpM in 1989.
- 59.961 – Divination bowl, wood with pigments, round base representing a bird fighting a snake. Yoruba, Nigeria, H = 18 cm, d = 18.5 cm. Bought for NpM in 1989. (See photo no. 7)
- 60.494 – Throne, wood with patina, carried by four caryatids (two men and two women), Yoruba, Egbado (?), Nigeria, H = 90 cm. Published in "Art of four continents" (I, 99 and 101).

Westafrican Complexes in General:

- 60.011 – Antelope dance headdress, wood with the rests of pigments. Kurumba, Burkina Faso, H = 118.5 cm. Bought for NpM in 1989. (See phot no. 8)
- 60.146 – Spoon from a half of calabash, Mali, l = 24 cm. Ludmila Forman's gift from 1990.
- 60.147 – Spoon from a half of calabash, Mali, l = 26 cm. Ludmila Forman's gift from 1990.
- 60.148 – Spoon from a half of calabash, Mali, l = 22 cm, Ludmila Forman's gift from 1990.
- 60.442 – Vessel for sauces, baked clay, greyish black surface and break. Bamum, Grassland, Cameroon. Bought for NpM in 1994. (See photo no. 9)

- Heddle pulley, wood with patina. Baule, Ivory Coast, H = 21 cm. Private coll. Prague.
- Miniature face mask, wood with patina. Dan, Ivory Coast, H = 10 cm. It comes from Joe Hloucha's collection. Private coll. Prague.
- Little spoon, brass, handle decorated with theme of two birds. Ashanti or Fanti, Southern Ghana, 18th–19th century (?), L = 17 cm. Private coll. Prague.
- Little spoon, iron. Ashanti or Fanti, Southern Ghana, 18th–19th century (?), L = 17 cm. Private coll. Prague.
- Anthropomorphic figure, talc, carved in "nomoli" style, Kissi (?), Sierra Leone, H = 20 cm. Private coll. Prague.

Northafrican Complex:

- Set of ceramic fragments discovered in al-Fustat, Cairo, Egypt, 13th–14th century, Ludmila Forman's gift from 1990.
 1. 60.251 – Potsherd, yellowish-white break, lustre glazed, L = 7 cm.
 2. 60.252 – Potsherd, yellowish-white break, white surface with blue bands, lustre glazed, 7.5 × 5.5 cm.
 3. 60.253 – Potsherd, yellowish-white break, white surface divided by blue lines into the fields, lustre glazed, 8.5 × 12.3 cm.
 4. 60.254 – Fragment of the vessel, yellowish-white break, white surface divided with blue bands into the fields, lustre glazed, 8.5 × 16.5 cm.
 5. 60.255 – Bowl, whitish break, blue glazed surface, walls divided into fields are decorated with relief of faces and figures. Made in Iran or imitating Iranian manufacture. H = 12 cm.
 6. 60.256 – Fragment of the vessel, reddish-brown break, green glazed surface, H = 31 cm.

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