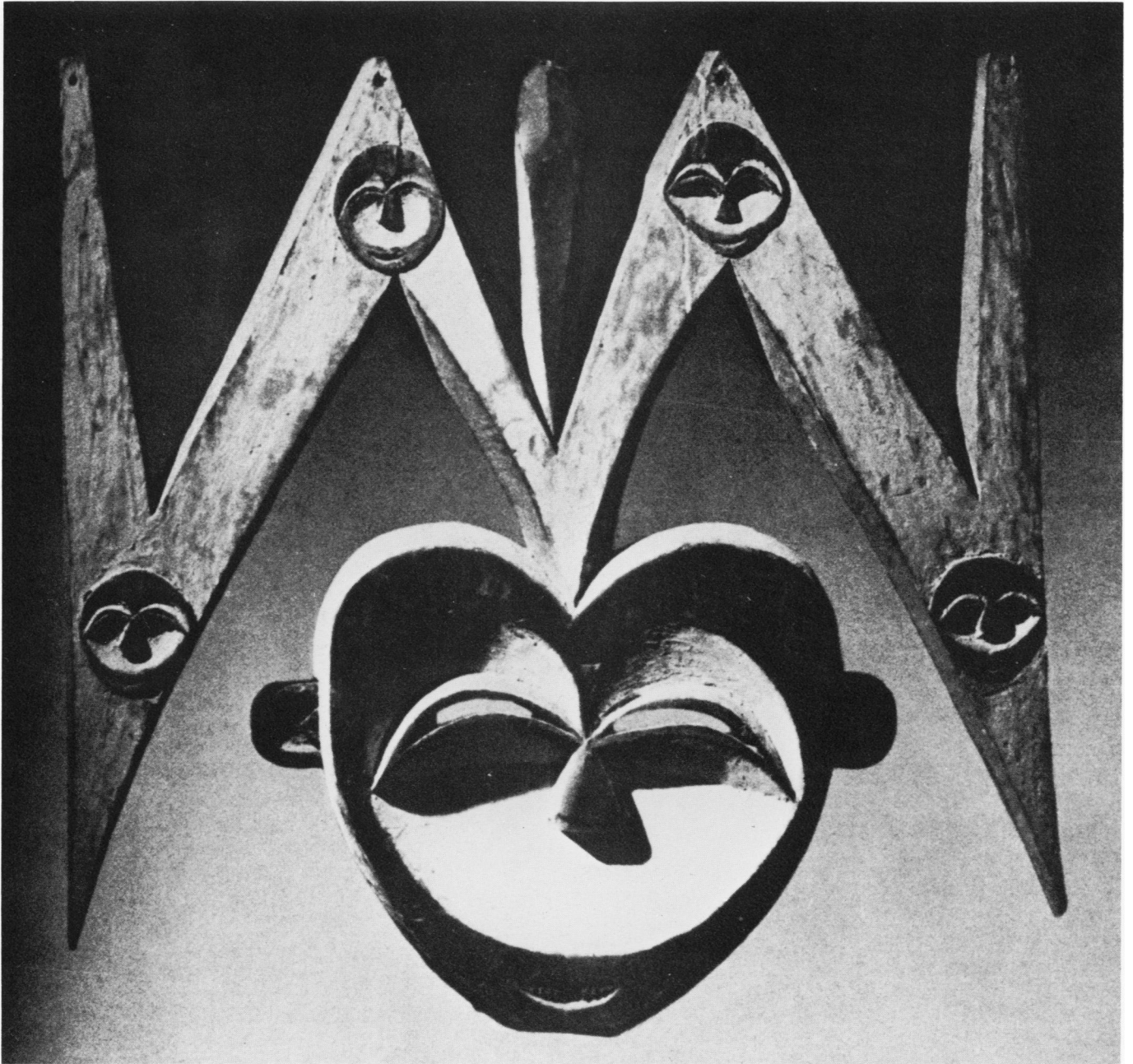


The Concave Face in African Art

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1. MASK, KWELE, MUSEES d'HISTOIRE NATURELLE ET d'ETHNOGRAPHIE, LA ROCHELLE.

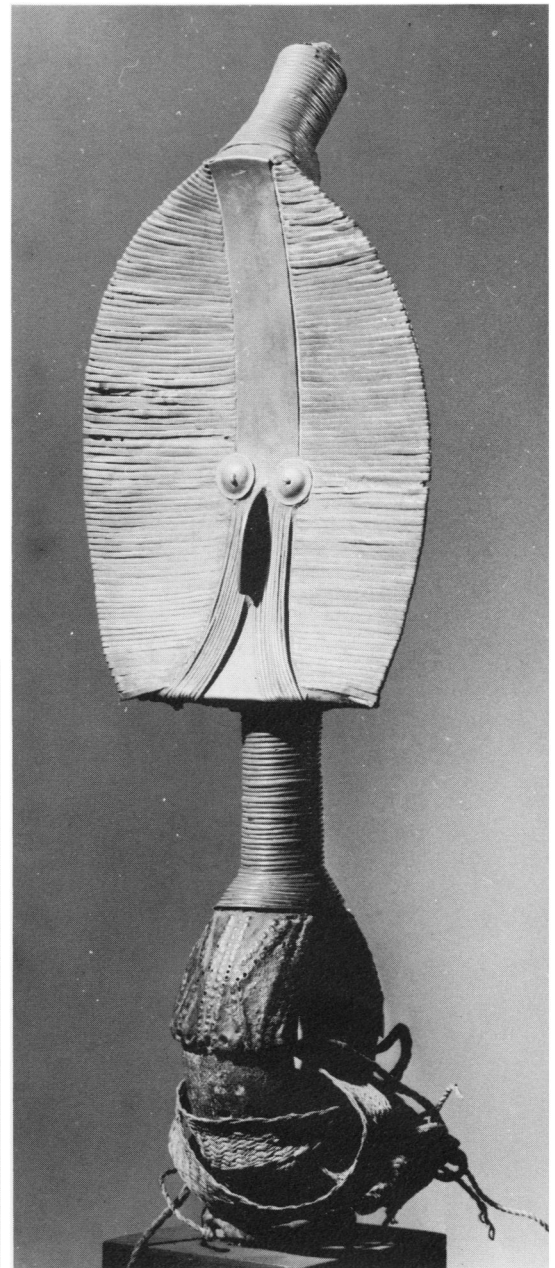
The human face is composed of convex and concave surfaces. Western art tends to accentuate the convex parts. Convexity looks agreeable to westerners: round cheeks indicate health, a pronounced chin suggests energy, an arched forehead (in German "gewölbte Stirn") signifies intelligence. On the other hand we associate negative qualities with concavity: hollow cheeks symbolize sickness or poverty, deep-set eyes look sinister. So normally westerners see and form the human face as a convex structure. If we hand a westerner half an eggshell and ask him to draw the features of a human face on it, he will draw them on the convex outside, not on the concave inside. The latter would, however, be equally justified.

In Africa we encounter both tendencies. Some tribes, like the northern Dan and the Bidjogo, form the human face as it is, equally weighing convexities and concavities. Others, like the Guro, enhance its convexity: the eyes on a Guro heddle pulley slide backwards to the ears as they never do on a real human face (Fig. 3). Other tribes however do just the contrary: they form the human face as a concavity (the inside of the eggshell).

There are three regions in which the concave tendency predominates: the Western Sudan with the Senufo, Bambara, Bobo (Fig. 2, 4); the region between the Lower Congo and the Ogowe with the masks of the Pangwe (Fang) and Kwele (Fig. 1) and the brass plated figures of the Kota and Ossyeba (Fig. 5); the eastern Congo with the Mbole, Metoko, Lega and Bembe (Figs. 6, 7). In all three cases other tribes with predominantly convex sculpture live in the same region: the Lobi in



3. HEDDLE PULLEY, GURO. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



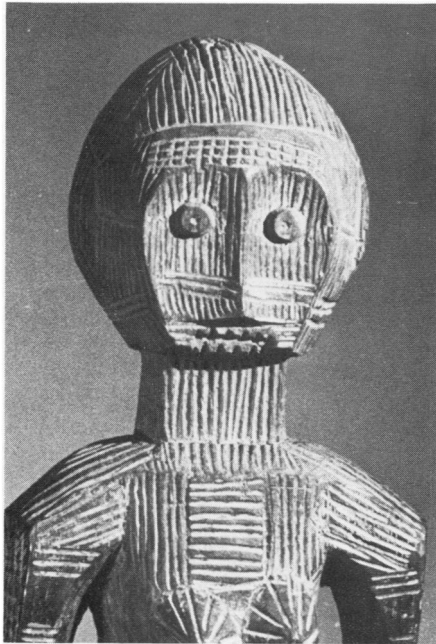
5. BRASS COVERED STATUETTE, OSSYEBA. MUSEE DE L'HOMME, PARIS.



2. HEAD OF A STAFF, BAMBARA. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



4. DANCE MASK, SENUFO. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



6. HEAD OF A FIGURE, METOKO. MUSEE ROYAL DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, TERVUREN



7. MASK, LEGA. MUSEE ROYAL DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, TERVUREN.

9. CREST, IDOMA. FROM SCULPTURE OF NORTHERN NIGERIA BY ROY SIEBER



8. MASK, BAULE. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



the Western Sudan; the Masange (Punu, Benjabi) between the Ogowe and Lower Congo, with their white-black-red female masks; the Baluba in the eastern Congo. Other tribes practise both tendencies equally: the face on a Kuba cup may be convex or concave, and so it is with the Chokwe masks, and with Bena Lulua statuettes. In some tribes one category of sculptures tends to be concave, another convex: the statues of the Bambara and the Dogon usually have convex faces, while the masks of these tribes are mostly concave; Bindji masks are concave, but their pipes have convex faces. The Baule even have three ways of forming the human face: mainly convex on their statuettes, concave on certain masks (Fig. 8), and flat, two-dimensional faces on their heddle pulleys and most of their masks.

Probably no tribe is destined by nature by some inherent aesthetic urge to carve in one manner and not in the other. The Senufo, so characteristically concave, produce an occasional convex piece; even Guro sculpture, which, as mentioned, exaggerates the convex tendency, can produce a pronouncedly concave face like the heddle pulley (Fig. 10).

Tribes who carve concave faces often emphasize the concave character by setting the face off from the lateral parts of the head by a sharp edge. Sometimes they even paint this edge differently, so that it frames the face as a curved line (Figs. 1, 7). Or else they achieve the same effect by painting the face in another colour than the lateral parts of the head (Fig. 9). On the figures of the Ossyeba and Kota mentioned above these lateral parts even disappear altogether, leaving nothing but a concave shell-like form, in which eyes, nose, and mouth are applied on the inside (Fig. 5).



10. HEDDLE PULLEY, GURO. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



11. WOODCUT BY KARL SCHMIDT-ROTLUFF

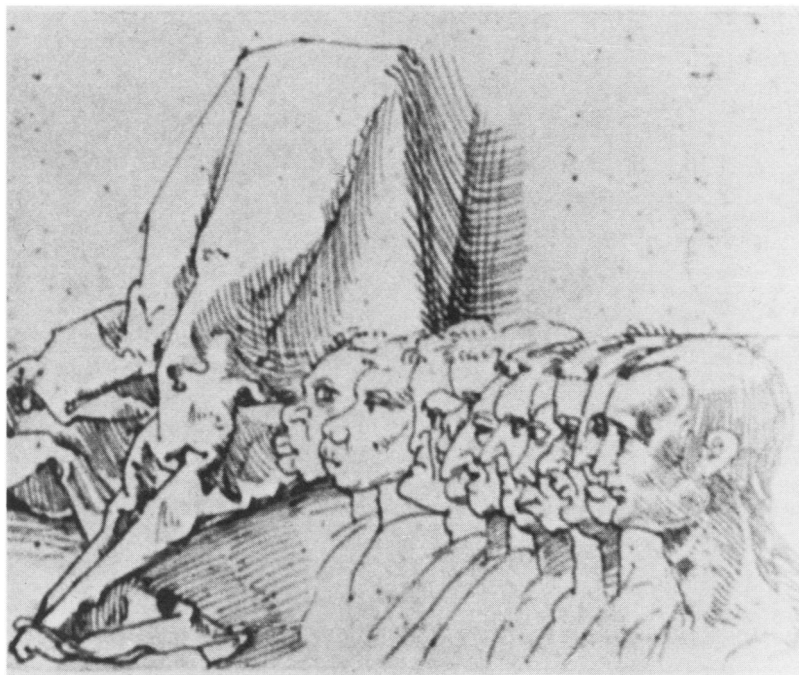
In Western art the concave face appears with cubism. Picasso was (or was not, as he claims) influenced by African art when he created the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" (Fig. 12). That the problem of the concave face occupied his mind particularly at the time is shown in various preliminary studies for this picture. After him, many other western artists sculptured or painted concave faces: Max Ernst, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (Fig. 11). These artists all knew African sculpture.

Possibly Albrecht Dürer had already reflected on these two opposed structural qualities of the human face. In a drawing in the "Dresdner Skizzenbuch" two heads in profile are shown side by side. The different planes of their surfaces are lined off against one another. With one of them the line limiting the cheeks is concave, with the other convex. If we ask whether there could be a rational reason for the concavity of the human face in African art, we find that the Negro face actually shows more concavity than the face of the white man. There exists a drawing by Dürer in which faces of different human races are lined up, the Negro at one end, the "nordic" head at the other (Fig. 13). They very distinctly show this difference between the more concave Negro face and the more convex Caucasian face.

It should also be taken into consideration that many African sculptures are perhaps not meant to be looked at in profile, but only from the front. If this is the case, then it matters little whether the face is carved to be more convex or more concave. Problems of light and shadow, or even of carving technique might influence the sculptor's choice. ■



12. *LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON* BY PABLO PICASSO. SPRING, 1907. OIL ON CANVAS, 8' x 7'8". THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, LILLIE P. BLISS BEQUEST.



13. *TEN PROFILE HEADS* BY ALBRECHT DURER. KUPFERSTICHKABINETT, BERLIN.