

ANIMISTIC ART IN THE ANTILLES

Katherine Kay-Willock

The term 'primitive art' legitimately applies to the art of the Pre-Columbian Antillean peoples, not because that art is unsophisticated, but because its makers believed that their ancestors lived in a primitive mythological age, and they sought to reaffirm, perhaps reawaken, that reality by re-presenting it in their art. When depicting that reality, when men lived as equals with animals and mythic beasts, Antillean artists did more than express complexity; they depicted transformation.

The legends and myths recorded by the Spanish Chronicles are rich with accounts of animistic transmutation, but this has been the single most difficult feature for anthropologists and archaeologists to understand. To comprehend this art we must join technology with facets of social organization, connected to symbolism and the arts, and analyzed in terms of human creativity and adaptation.

An excellent case in point is illustrated here. It is a unique and extremely exciting piece that was found and reconstructed by Mrs. Janet Wall of Union Island, near St. Vincent, in the Lesser Antilles. The specimen was discovered in November of 1975 and Mrs. Wall reported on it and furnished the accompanying photograph while visiting the Virgin Islands in April of 1976. It came from approximately the same site described by the late Ripley Bullen as Arnos Vale, however, this piece was found literally in the Arnos Vale River itself, some two or more feet below the water level. Mrs. Wall has subsequently reported finding additional fragments of the vessel bottom and she believes that they constitute what she calls a "stand" on which the head rests.

Collectors inherently approach these pieces directly, usually judging them in terms of their inherent qualities. However unscholarly, this approach has resulted in superb collections of Antillean art. Archaeologists seem to be preoccupied with processes, not drama; concerned with only relationships, not being. We see aboriginal art as a variant of the material culture and use it to answer questions about evolution and diffusion. Characteristically, we leave it to other specialists to show an interest in the art's social or psychic aspects.

Anthropologists like to say that the study of aboriginal art begins with the question: "What did this art mean to the people for whom it was originally intended?" Yet this is precisely where our methods betray us, often leaving us in possession of technical descriptions void of feeling.

In failing to look further, we sell this art short. There are other masterpieces of Antillean art of the highest order throughout the Caribbean. The people of the Antilles guarded them, knew them and needed them. Seen on their own terms, they can be recognized. They stand out, as does this beautiful piece. It is with heartfelt thanks that we commend and congratulate Mrs. Wall on her superb discovery in the hope that we will be hearing much more about the Arnos Vale River of St. Vincent.

