

NEGRO ART COMING INTO ITS OWN.

Part II.

Back in 1791, more than an even century before Negro sculpture became a conspicuously important factor in art, writes C. J. Bulliet, in the Chicago Evening Post, a learned French traveler meditating on Sphinx, reposing in the sands the eternal riddle of the Egyptian desert, concluded the mighty sculpture was not the work of Egyptians, but of the more remotely antique Ethiopians—a people of black complexion, thick lips and woolly hair.

Constantinople Francis Chassebeuf de Volney was the traveler, and early in his "Ruins, or Meditation on the Resolutions of Empires," he sets out his opinions and arguments at considerable length. In early editions published in the United States the greater part of this material was omitted from the translation, either carelessly or for a reason—a reason that no longer is vital in this day and age of eager research into the works of the primitives of all races and colors for vital structural methods in art.

Of the primitives, none—not even the Chinese—have had so important parts to play in the development of the modern methods as the African sculptors. The carvings, however, in wood and stone that so profoundly influenced and still vitally affect Picasso, Derain, Matisse, and Vlaminck—with which Gauguin was familiar—in which Jacob Epstein and Franz Metzner find motifs—probably not wholly unknown to Rodin—there seems a suggestion in such things as his Balzac and Durghers of Calais, though these may be traced, too, to the meek primitives—these Negro carvings that have had so vital an influence—are of not nearly the remote antiquity of the Sphinx.

Still, if Volney's arguments and reflections are accepted, they spring from the root of Ethiopian culture that flourished at Thebes long before foreigners from Asia invaded the rich valley of the Nile and set up that civilization which is seen flowering under the patronage of Isis and Osiris when the curtain of history rises. It was in the dimly guessed prolog of history, in Volney's meditation, that the Sphinx came into being.

"And the Genius"—The Genius that conducted Volney back into the times without measure—"an apparition, pale clothed in large and flowing robes, such as specters, are painted rising from their tombs"—"And the Genius proceeded to enumerate and point out the objects to me. "Those piles of ruins," said he, "which you see in that narrow valley by the Nile, are the remains of opulent cities, the pride of the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. Behold the wrecks of her metropolis, the Thebes with her hundred palaces, the parent of cities, and the monument of the caprice of destiny. There a people, now forgotten, discovered, while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair, founded on the study of the laws of nature, those and religious systems, which, still govern the universe."

In a copious footnote Molney cites numerous authorities among the ancients for his conclusion that "we have the strongest reasons to believe that the country neighboring to the tropic was the cradle of

the sciences, and of consequence that the first learned nation was a nation of blacks. "I have suggested the same ideas in my 'Travels into Syria,' he continue, 'founded upon the black complexion of the Sphinx. I have since ascertained that the antique images of Thebias have the same characteristics; and Mr. Bruce has offered a multitude of analogous facts."

Peter Eckler, in his edition of the "Ruins," recently reprinted with Volney's entire argument on this point restored, suggests that the great Frenchman may have been on the trail of the "solution to the secret so long concealed beneath the flat nose, thick lips and Negro features of the Egyptian Sphinx."

"The Ethiopians, asserted Diodorus, "conceived themselves to be of greater antiquity than any other nation. They suppose themselves also to be the inventors of divine worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, of sacrifices, and of every religious practice." Lucian adds his testimony: "The Ethiopians are the first who invented the scene of the stars and gave names to the planets, not at random and without meaning, but descriptive of the qualities which they conceived them to possess; and it was from them that this art passed, still in an imperfect state, to the usurping Egyptians established Memphis as their capital, abandoning the ancient Ethiopian Thebes, and Memphis, in turn, was deserted for the new capital at the delta of the Nile and founded by Alexander.

Scholarships since Volney has made all sorts of guesses as to the origin and identity of

the Sphinx—differing from his—and from each other. In the most modern of authoritative works, "A History of Sculpture," by Profs. Chase and Post of Harvard, published by Harpers in his present year of 1925, it is asserted that the Great Sphinx of Gizeh "is now generally recognized as another representation of this Pharaoh, the builder of the Sec 1 Pyramid," a specialation, to be accepted or rejected as new evidence is found. Volney's theory has the merit at least, of being eminently picturesque.



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