in memorium

Frank Willett
1925–2006

by John Picton

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of Professor Frank Willett on June 15, 2006, a couple of months before his eighty-first birthday. He had, after all, been a presence on the African art scene longer than most of us.

There were essentially three parts to Frank. First, he was a gifted field archaeologist and ethnographer, skills necessary to understanding the art and antiquities of Ife, in due course proving himself to be an able teacher and writer and pioneering the application of scientific techniques to his material. Second, he was a family man, devoted to his wife, Connie, and their four children; their needs were given firm precedence over his professional career throughout their lives together. Third, he was a devout Catholic, attending Mass daily whenever possible throughout the greater part of his life. Of course, the assessment of the first of these elements is what is required for *African Arts*, but it must never be forgotten that for Frank the other two were part and parcel of a life truly well lived, and they were the context of his archaeological research, teaching and publication.

Frank was born on August 18, 1925 at Bolton, Lancashire, UK, and he received his high school education at Bolton Municipal Secondary School, where he eventually became “head boy.” It was during this period that he met Connie Hewitt, whom he married in 1950 once he had found paid employment, and who introduced him to Catholic Christianity (although he was not formally instructed or received into the church until his time at Oxford; at that time, one had to have the permission of one’s father to join the church until reaching the age of twenty-one, and in Frank’s case this was not forthcoming).

At the age of eighteen, in 1943, despite having been accepted by University College, Oxford, to read English Language and Literature, he was called up for military service in the Royal Air Force. Frank was sent to the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University to study Japanese, in order to intercept and translate enemy communications but, although he was due to be posted to Indonesia for this purpose, he contracted pneumonia and remained in the UK. In this context, it is worth noting that throughout his life, Frank enjoyed a gift for language learning, readily acquiring a command of several languages, European and, in due course, African. On medical discharge from military service, Frank went up to Oxford, also participating in excavations through the university archaeological society. He decided to make a career in the Anglo-Saxon field. After graduation, he stayed on at Oxford to take the Diploma in Anthropology, and it was during this time that his professor, Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, introduced him to William Fagg, who was, by this time, responsible for the African collections of the British Museum. They became firm friends. Frank also took the opportunity to work at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris as part of his anthropological studies.

He finally left Oxford at Christmas 1949, taking up employment at Portsmouth City Museum on New Year’s Day 1950 (not to become a public holiday in the UK for another twenty years), taking up appointment as Keeper of the Department of Ethnology and General Archaeology at the Manchester University Museum in November the same year. The collections for which he was now responsible were wide-ranging, though his
initial intention of making a research career in Anglo-Saxon archaeology was frustrated by the fact that they did not include a single Anglo-Saxon artifact. Nevertheless, he was quick to establish a record of research and publication in regard to the Oceanic collections. He even applied, unsuccessfully, for a post in New Zealand in the hope of gaining first-hand experience of his new interest. The Pacific’s loss would prove to be Africa’s gain!

Frank’s first encounter with the sculpture and antiquities of Ife were the exhibitions of art from what were then the British colonies, organized by his friend William Fagg in 1949 and 1951; these included Ife works then on loan to the British Museum from Nigeria for cleaning and conservation. They did not yet grab Frank as the basis of his life’s work, but early in 1956 he did apply (this time successfully) for a six-month post in Nigeria to help prepare the Lagos museums for its opening the following year. Before going to Nigeria, however, William introduced Frank to his younger brother Bernard, who was Government Archaeologist in Nigeria, working with Kenneth Murray in the Department of Antiquities. When Bernard found that Frank was a field archaeologist, he arranged for him to work instead with the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme under the direction of Dr. Saburi Biobaku, to begin the excavation of Old Oyo. Given that this was a long-since-deserted site in the wilderness, the museum at Ife provided Frank with the facilities he needed for the study and writing up of the season’s work. At the end of the six months Bernard tried persuading Frank to accept employment in Nigeria, but with two young children, Margaret Mary and Stephen, and satisfying employment in Manchester, he declined.

In 1957, Bernard Fagg succeeded Murray as Director of Antiquities in Nigeria and happened to be in Ife in November that year at the time of the accidental discovery of brass and ceramic sculptures at Ita Yemoo, on what was then the northeastern outskirts of the city of Ife. He telephoned Frank and invited him back to Nigeria more or less immediately for a second season to excavate this particular site, and at the end of it Bernard finally persuaded him to accept an appointment as archaeologist with the Department of Antiquities. In 1958, Frank resigned his Manchester appointment and moved to Ife with his wife and their three children, the youngest, Pauline, newly born. He was to continue the archaeological and ethnographic investigation of Ife building on the previous work of Murray, Bernard Fagg, and John Goodwin, an archaeologist from South Africa, and to take responsibility for the Ife Museum of Antiquities. Within a few months of their arrival, however, Pauline contracted polio (at that time immunization was not available to anyone under two years of age). Connie and the children returned to the UK and Pauline was hospitalized for year. Connie and the eldest two children returned to visit Frank only to find themselves caught in a most horrendous accident on the Ibadan-Ife road occasioned by an oil slick placed on the tarmac by highway robbers. The details are too complicated to set out here but the children were safe, though Connie’s neck would certainly have been broken but for a sculpture by Lamidi Fakeye on the back seat of their motorcar. Frank, however, was run over by an oncoming vehicle and one of his legs smashed into the road, so much so that when he looked at what had happened his first thought was that he might as well pull the lower leg off and throw it away! Luckily, the leg was repaired at Ibadan University Hospital.

By the time I arrived in Nigeria in June 1961, Frank, Connie, and the three children were happily reunited in Ife, a never-failing source of comfort, good humor and hospitality, introducing me to an ideal of family life as it could be lived. Their fourth child, Jean, was born the following year. In 1963, however, because of the developing educational needs of their children, Frank decided not to return to Nigeria, although his post remained open to him. For a year he was obliged to take a high school teaching post in French and English in his home town. Fortunately, in 1964 he was offered a research fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford, where he began work on a number of papers on the art and archaeology of Ife, as well as drafting the book that would be published as *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. He revisited Ife briefly with the help of a Leverhulme grant. Then, in 1966, at the conclusion of his fellowship, he was appointed to a newly established post in Art History and African Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he remained until 1976. The work of continuing the excavation of Ife was taken up by Ekpo Eyo, who had succeeded Bernard Fagg as Director of Antiquities, and by Paul Ozanne and Peter Garlake of the University of Ife. It is worth noting that, as far as I am aware, since their time no serious excavation has taken place. Ife has become the subject of the illegal trade in antiquities and the university and museum collections the subject of armed robbery.

*Ife in the History of West African Sculpture* was published in 1967 and provided an account of all the then known Ife sculptures in cast brass, pottery (“terracotta”), and stone and of all the evidence available to place them in a social and art-historical context. However, not a hint of the evidence from C14 or thermoluminescence was then available to provide any secure dating. Frank was entirely dependent on the interpretive framework proposed by William Fagg in which Ife ceramic sculpture was the distant child of Nok; once the tradition was transferred into the medium of cast brass, Ife was the ancestor of the art of Benin City. This placed the art of Ife within the first half of the second millennium AD, and this has in fact been confirmed by subsequent scientific evidence, even if the Nok-Ife-Benin relationship is almost certainly an over-simplification. First, ceramic sculpture is widespread throughout West Africa and we are still very far from understanding the inter-relationships of the various traditions. Second, as Vansina effectively suggests in his 1984 *Art History in Africa*, there may well have been several city-states in the region to the west of the lower Niger, each with its art traditions, each influencing the other. The dynastic myths of Benin City and of the various kingdoms of contemporary Yorubaland cannot be taken as a substitute for the archaeological evidence. As yet, however, we only know of Ife and, through the work of Ekpo Eyo, Owo, together with a diverse group of unprovenanced copper-alloy castings designated by William Fagg as the “Lower Niger Bronze Industries.” (This group initially included the castings found at Igbo-Ukwu, but the excavations by Professor Thorstun Shaw have demonstrated that these works are the product of a bronze-casting tradition almost certainly of indigenous innovation, in contrast to the brass castings of Ife, which technologically probably derive from a trans-Saharan source.)

Collaboration with a wide range of scholars internationally became the hallmark of Frank’s continuing engagement with the art and archaeology of Ife, pioneering the application of an array of scientific and statistical methods, including lead isotope analysis, and he continued to visit Ife as and when circumstances made it possible. In 2004 he published *The Art of Ife: A Descriptive Catalogue and Database*. It was by necessity published as a CD-ROM, given that it included more than 350,000 words and 2,200 illustrations, placing it well beyond the possibilities of publication in book form. Here, Frank collates all the evidence now available, including all the excavations carried out in Ife since his time there, all the known works of art, including those emerging from illicit activity, and all the relevant scientific data. Frank has bequeathed us an authoritative account of an extraordinary civilization and its legacy of cast brass and ceramic sculpture flourishing in the forested region to the west of the lower Niger at a time prior to European coastal trade, a civilization nevertheless in contact with an international network of trade, a civilization of such power that (whatever the relationship between myth and real-time events) the rest of its local world would wish to claim descent from it. For this he received the Amaury Talbot Prize of the Royal Anthropological Institute; yet, ever the pioneer, Frank recognized that it was merely a provisional account. Indeed, in his final months he continued working on another
Frank Willett, 1964, visiting Ife in between high school teaching and his Oxford Fellowship, with Robin Farquarson (right) in Nigeria on a British pre-university voluntary service scheme.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PICTON

paper on lead isotopes in west Africa with an American colleague, Edward Sayre, checking the proofs at the very last stage of his life in this world, and published since his passing.

At Northwestern University, Frank had to teach himself how to be a historian of art. His graduate students became household names in our fields of study: they included Kate Ezra, Sharon Patten, and the late Jeff Donaldson. In addition to completing work on his 1967 Ife book, Frank wrote African Art: An Introduction (1971, 2d ed. 1993, 3d rev. ed. 2002). This book was the first account of the subject to get away from the geographical model of tribal sculpture, taking instead a thematic approach. It was also the first publication of its kind to include, together with ethnographic and archaeological material from all parts of the continent, a discussion of everything from southern Africa rock art and pre-dynastic Egypt to the modernist developments of the twentieth century. Each edition has been reprinted many times, demonstrating its continuing usefulness. Indeed, as the general introduction that it sets out to be, it has not yet been surpassed.

In 1976 Frank returned to Britain as Professor and Director of the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow University, an appointment from which he retired in 1990. William Hunter was an eighteenth-century anatomist and scientist whose bequest of an eclectic collection of medical and zoological specimens, historical and ethnographic artifacts, and works of art had in 1804 provided Scotland with its oldest public museum. With his customary energy and refusal to take “no” for an answer, Frank immediately embarked upon the work of transforming the museum displays. He also saw to the completion and opening of both the Hunterian Art Gallery, with collections including a large number of the works of J.M. Whistler and the majority of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s watercolors, and the reconstruction of Mackintosh’s house.

Frank contributed to the teaching of Glasgow University’s department of archaeology while maintaining his own research interests, putting together exhibitions on Nigerian art at the Hunterian Museum, as well as his 1980 collaboration with Ekpo Eyo, Treasures of Ancient Nigeria. It is, however, one of those sad ironies in a life devoted to demonstrating the value and worth of the civilizations of Africa that Frank eventually found himself opposed to the repatriation of cultural property. There were two reasons. Firstly, if everything were to be returned to its place of origin, museums would become entirely local in their vision of the world, and this would be in no-one’s interests. Secondly, Nigeria had manifestly become an unsafe place for its antiquities. There was ample evidence of widespread illegal excavation, with the consequent destruction of scientific data, as well as the widespread and continuing looting, often assisted by armed robbery, of temples, palaces, and museums.

Frank was possibly the most highly decorated and honored scholar within the fields of African art studies. He was appointed CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1985. He was vice-chair of the Scottish Museums Council 1986–89 and took the lead in a project to record all the ethnographic collections in Scottish museums, a project completed in 1994. In 1995, together with Robert Farris Thompson, Frank was presented with the Leadership Award of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association, the most representative and authoritative world body of African art scholarship, at its Triennial Conference in New York. In 1997 he was awarded the bicentenary medal of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which he had been a Fellow since 1979 and Hon Curator 1992–97.

Frank proved himself to be among the greatest figures within our fields of study. His research and scholarship were thorough. He set himself high standards and was no less exacting on others, always to their benefit, and yet he wore his authority lightly. He was always generous and encouraging, especially to younger scholars. Throughout his time in Scotland, for example, Frank was an active member of the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG), an association of curators and others interested in ethnographic collections in British museums. It was typical of him that when MEG presented him with two prints from Oshogbo as a token of their thanks for his encouragement he was moved to tears. He really had little idea of the esteem in which people held him.

I first met Frank a few weeks after my arrival at the Lagos Museum in June 1961. He was there at the beginning of my professional life and proved to be a constant friend, tutor, guide, mentor, and critic, a firm presence in my life such that at his departing it feels as if part of my own self had been cut off. I am sure that there are many people of my generation and younger who, having had the good fortune of meeting and working with him, will feel as I do.

In writing this obituary notice I am grateful for Frank’s own account of how he found his way into African art, “A Chapter of Accidents: Archaeological Discoveries in Ife,” in Arts & Cultures (Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva, 2006, pp. 144–55), and especially to Connie Patten, and the late Jeff Donaldson.

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