in memoriam

Ezio Bassani
1924–2018

by William Hart

With the death of Ezio Bassani at the age of 93 on August 4, 2018, the African art world has lost one of its major figures.

An anti-fascist Partisan in his youth in the closing years of World War II, a student of literature, then a businessman who traveled widely as manager of a paper-manufacturing company, it was not until his retirement in his fifties that he gave himself over entirely to what had become his ruling passion: the art of sub-Saharan Africa.

During business trips to London, Paris, Brussels, and New York, Bassani had already begun to acquire a small collection of African masks and figures. He also made contacts, which became friendships, with a number of museum curators and art dealers. However, his collecting activities took second place to what became an all-consuming impulse to learn more and write about the works of art he loved. His first book, Scultura africana nei musei italiani (1975), reviewed the African art collections of museums in his native Italy. His identification of African works of art in early Italian collections like those of the Medici in Florence introduced him to the Afro-Portuguese ivories carved by West African artists for Portuguese patrons in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and to material and documentary evidence of the early history of collecting African art and artifacts by European princes and savants. From the former came his book, jointly authored with William Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory (1988), a ground-breaking study of the Afro-Portuguese ivories, still unsurpassed, that accompanied the exhibition of the ivories at the Center for African Art in New York. His research into the latter culminated in his book, jointly authored with William Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory (1988), a ground-breaking study of the Afro-Portuguese ivories, still unsurpassed, that accompanied the exhibition of the ivories at the Center for African Art in New York.

Bassani never visited Africa, much less carried out fieldwork there, and, although freely acknowledging his debt to the firsthand reports and collecting data of others, was insistent that he was not an ethnographer.

In his view, an ethnographic approach didn’t distinguish between the works of a master artist and those of a journeyman or artisan, and for Bassani it was the former, the works of unsuspected African Michelangelos and Donatellos, that he was particularly drawn to identify and celebrate. Hence his many catalogue entries and journal articles attributing a group of works to a specific master or workshop: ‘Il Maestro delle Capigliature a Cascata’ (1976); ‘Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area’ (1977); ‘Una Bottega di Grandi Artisti Bambara’ (1978); and so on. He was not the first to make such attributions, and indeed his were often refinements to the work of others, and equally subject to further refinements and corrections in their turn, but they were a major element in his contribution to the study of African art. They helped prepare the way for the great artists of sub-Saharan Africa to be exhibited today alongside those of Europe, Asia and the Americas in the principal art museums and galleries of the world.

In 2000 he sold his collection of African art to the new Museo delle Culture in Milan, retaining only a few well-loved objects in his home in Varese. As a man and scholar Bassani was without self-regard or inflated sense of his own importance, and sometimes expressed mild incomprehension at encountering it in others. He saw the study of African art as a collaborative enterprise involving the sharing of ideas and information. He often spoke of himself as proposing hypotheses and expected that in due course these would be challenged or modified in the light of new knowledge or deeper understanding. He freely acknowledged his intellectual debts to others, particularly to William Fagg, and in one of the last pieces he wrote, movingly recalled their first encounters and later friendship.

His energy was unflagging. Well into his nineties he was taking on new projects. He had within the last six months submitted to a publisher the text of an update to his 1988 book on the Afro-Portuguese ivories and was editing with Gigi Pezzoli a catalogue for a forthcoming exhibition in Bologna in 2019.

He was predeceased in February 2018 by his wife of more than seventy years and fellow Partisan Edmea Maggiolo and is survived by their daughters Chiara and Paola.

William Hart is the author of Continuity and Discontinuity in the Art History of Sierra Leone (Quaderni Poro 9, 1995). Since his retirement from teaching in 2009 he has collaborated with the late Ezio Bassani in updating Bassani and Fagg’s 1988 catalogue raisonné of Afro-Portuguese ivories. wa.hart@ulster.ac.uk

References cited

