

1979

"ZAIRE TRASH CAN ART"

This ashtray/plague is what I have called "Zaire trash can art" but you'll need an explanation for this title to have any significance. By "trash can", I mean that the man who made it simply took disposed tin cans and used them to make the object. By "Zaire", I mean that he came from the country of Zaire. Hence the following simple story behind it.

If you look at a map of Africa, you will see a large country called "Zaire", or if you're using a very old map, "Belgian Congo". In mid-1978, very complex internal and international political maneuvering, which I won't try to explain here, caused terrible things to happen. There was a very great massacre of blacks and whites in a large city in the southern part of Zaire called Kolwezi. Unfortunately, afterwards, Zaire government leaders, in trying to put down the political upheaval, indiscriminately killed thousands of innocent people in the villages who spoke the Lunda language. Many other thousands fled south across the Zambian border and ended up with relatives (in Zambia) or in the large international refugee camps near Solwezi in Zambia (on old maps still called "Northern Rhodesia"). Denied their normal living as small craftsmen, etc., several men decided to try to make these small ashtrays/plagues to support themselves and not have to depend on international forms of welfare. Although they spoke Lunda, Swahili and French, I spoke only English, and we had to communicate through my servant. I became very interested in what they were trying to do and, more accurately, were doing. Thus amidst much extremely polite and flowery bartering, joking, and stories of Zaire and Zambia (by them) and of America (by me!), we struck up a long term "business deal", i.e. I purchased a lot(!), that lasted from January until July of this year. The "negotiations" were always charming and pleasant and occurred whenever they completed more objects. Thus, negotiations might end up with supper being burnt or a Sunday morning's sleep being ruined, but were really great fun for all, with all sorts of languages and even some fractured English being used in July. (They were superb linguists.) Anyway, to explain the best I can how they made this form of what professionals call "primitive" art.

As far as I can gather, and I'm sure that this is not completely accurate, it was made as follows: After collecting old disposed tin cans, they cut the tins and made them flat if they weren't already. Then they made a mold of wood or sand - I'm not at all sure on this - and with a small hammer and simple tools slowly pounded the "tin" around the mold and hence into the desired pattern, or picture, that you see. Finally they put some sort of oil or grease on the metal, burned it in a charcoal fire (which obviously made it black) and took sandpaper to scrap off part of the burnt spots to make the light parts on the picture. Hence, my term "Zaire trash can art".

I doubt if what I have given you is worth anything in the art world(!), despite its uniqueness, but it is meant for you from me as I look back at this time of year on my years spent in Africa. Many thanks for your kindness during the past year.

*John - 1979*