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Esther Warner Brings You- Africa in Clay

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Esther Warner
Brings You—

AFRICA

by Peggy Krenek

"The hair of the ma is black and long like the vines
that climb to the top of the high bush;
The eye of the ma is bright like the lightning that
strikes the tall tree;
The hand of the ma can make photo in clay;
The gun of the ma can make the meat in bush to die
of fear of far away:
The big woman is ma to we, the big woman got
good heart for we.
Kau Blouzio! Ho! Kau Blouzio! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

K AU BLOUZIO in the language of the natives of
Liberia, Africa, means "first-born woman of her
mother who can stand on her own feet." It is the
name the blackmen lovingly gave to Esther Warner,
an applied art graduate from Iowa State, when she
lived in that strange land with her botanist-husband
during the last war.

Mrs. Warner met her husband, Dr. Robert Warner,
while she was a student here at Iowa State. They
lived in Ames during 1940 and 1941. Then, as the
war was coming on, her husband was called as re­
search director of the Liberian rubber plantations of
the Firestone Rubber Company. His job was to help
speed the growth of rubber trees, so vital to our de­
defense industries.

Seeks African Art

Mrs. Warner took this as an opportunity to learn
about native art. She tramped through jungles and
native villages in search of African art and techniques.
Her fingers, guiding a chisel, spoke a language the
natives understood.

An old chief named Kondea recognized in Esther
Warner a fellow artist who "knew in the heart how
a tool could talk to the wood." In token of this, he
gave her a large hunk of rare purple heartwood that
is seldom seen except in slender sticks. He made for
her his finest bowls, each carved to fit the personality
who ate from them. There was a spoon carved to
go with each bowl. He called them American spoons
with a hand at each end, since the American people
do everything so "quick-time."

Kondea spoke of the beauty of the shape of an
egg—to him the most beautiful form God had de­
signed. Remembering this later back in the United
States, Mrs. Warner derived the shapes of a new
pottery, Denwar dinnerware, from the oval outline
of an egg. She and Jo Dendel, an artist friend who
visited her in Liberia, developed this line of Africa-
IN CLAY

inspired pottery. Four colors from the jungles of Liberia appear in the glazes. THATCH is a warm beige like the roofs of thatched houses; the golden sands of the Gulf of Guinea appear in GUINEA GOLD; COLA BROWN shows the red-brown of cola nuts which native porters chew; and the giant bombox tree was the source of BOMBOX GREEN. This Bantu pottery is carried in leading department stores throughout the country with headquarters in Costa Mesa, California.

Wealth of Africa.

Mrs. Warner believes that the real wealth of Africa is not in the gold, ivory, pepper, slaves and rubber. It is in the intrinsic fineness and the amazing culture of the native tribesmen. All of this feeling she has expressed in her book, “New Song in a Strange Land.” She draws a picture of Liberia through the natives who became her friends. Reading her book is like taking a walk through Africa with this “ma who can make photo in clay.”

The “New Song in a Strange Land” is composed of many strains. The old chief Kondea, of the sensitive hands and shining eyes and booming laugh, is a vibrant chord in the song.

The sound of native drums resounds through the book. These drums retell many of Mrs. Warner’s unique African experiences. Once when she was asked to dance a dance of her people, she obliged with a jitterbug step after which the chief commented, “the civilized dance is a fine thing.”

Her red fingernail polish made a sensation with the natives at the Goatown market. They wanted to know if the fingers on her feet grew red like her hands. She removed her shoes to show that it was true. An old lady looked over the shoulders of the crowd and screamed. She thought it was blood.

Aggrey Bead

One of the things Mrs. Warner set out to find in Africa was an Aggrey bead. These beads were made of variegated glass in ancient times and were found in the Gold Coast of West Africa. Once every year, as the story goes, a slave lost his life in the bead sacrifice of ancient Benin, a province in Liberia. The beads were saturated in the blood of a slave who was given a message to tell the bead spirit. Then he was beheaded that he might in spirit form carry the message that had been given him. Mrs. Warner bargained for one of these beads while crossing a turbulent stream on a knotted liana bridge. As she clutched the bead in her fist, she felt that she had purchased the mute clue to so much that is not known.

(Continued on page 18)

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AFRICA IN CLAY—
(Continued from page 15)

Mrs. Warner had first heard of Liberia in her little
girl dreams, in which she spanned the earth in giant
strides. She imagined that with a long step, a hop and
a jump she would be in the Bight of Benin, an open
bay in the Gulf of Guinea. Later abroad a blacked-
out ship with her husband she re-heard the song of
her dreams:

"Beware, Beware! The Bight of Benin!
Forty come out; thirty-nine stay in."

But contrary to her dreams, Mrs. Warner had no
fear of life in Africa and her experiences there be-
came a vital part of her. As she was leaving Liberia,
she felt that "When you have been borne away on
the strong wings from a land you have loved, you
have not left that land behind! . . . You know that
before there can be song again, you must learn how
to incorporate all you have experienced away from
it into a new pattern of thinking and feeling."

Work Exhibited

An exhibit of Mrs. Warner's work has been fea-
tured this fall in the show cases of the Home Eco-
nomics Hall. She was enrolled at Iowa State as Esther
Bruchlacher. While on campus, she was active as a
steady contributor and a member of the board and
editorial staff of Sketch, creative writing magazine. On
the frontispiece of Mrs. Warner's book, Dr. Pearl
Hogrefe, faculty advisor of Sketch, is named as a per-
son influential in her writing of this book.
Mrs. Warner designed the hand painted murals in the Delta Zeta dining room in her student days. The designs were inspired by the pencil “doodling” marks she noticed in the Delta Zeta phone booths.

Mrs. Warner sketched the drawings on the wall and all the women in the house painted the mural in their spare moments.

After she was graduated from the Applied Art Department of Iowa State in 1938, Mrs. Warner went to Columbia University, having received a Lydia Roberts fellowship. There she studied sculpture and received her master’s degree in fine arts. After this she taught art in the Des Moines public schools. She also taught in the Department of Related Arts at the University of Minnesota for one year.

Another Novel

Now Mrs. Warner is writing another novel with a Liberian background. Her Liberian experiences have contributed toward the development of her distinctive style. They will undoubtedly influence much of her future work. For it was with a sad heart that she left West Africa—the land where the natives had sung to her this tribute:

“Kau Blouzio, Kau Blouzio, Kau Blouzio!
The woman that God fashioned like the trunk of tall tree,
The woman that moves like a field of rice before the wind,
The ma with the medicine for shoot the meat,
The long ma, the swift ma, our ma who walks with we!”

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