The Nagas love the beautiful. However different the ideals of beauty may be, the general character of enjoyment is of the same order everywhere. Even when living in hardship, men never spend their time entirely in search of food and shelter, and those who live under more favourable conditions and are not solely occupied with mere survival, never let their days go by in indolence. Even the most destitute human groups, along with those more favoured by nature, have produced aesthetically pleasing objects and dedicated their energies to the creation of works of art.

Two distinct styles, each being the prerogative of a particular sex, can be found in the various decorative arts of the Naga people. Whereas the men’s style finds its expression in wood-carving, painting and basketry, women express themselves in weaving, embroidery and pottery.

Traditional Naga art can be found mainly in ornaments, in the decoration of clothing, of weapons, on the front of houses, on entrance doors to villages and on tools. Although limited in its application, in order to appreciate it fully the hardships and difficulties against which artisans had to fight in the past must be known.

The main worry of each Naga village was to protect itself against enemy attacks. Although headhunting was not practiced within the same village, it was commonly carried out among villages of the same tribe. Under such unstable living conditions it was difficult for an artist to find the time to dedicate himself to a research of mere aesthetic pleasure from which no material benefit could be derived.

Villages were situated on the hillsides for reasons of defence. However, these houses, closely huddled together and built with highly inflammable materials such as bamboo and palm leaves, were not safe from fires, either accidental or started by an enemy. Fear of the devastating effects of fire discouraged the artist constantly from engaging in the production of complicated and lasting works of art. The sense of security and persistence, necessary for the flourishing of any form of art, was constantly menaced.

Furthermore, production was limited because the villages, separated by dense forests and deep rivers, could not maintain constant contact and interchanges, and for this reason an artisan was not pushed to produce great quantities of objects for commercial reasons. Even today in the majority of the tribes each family manufactures only those articles necessary for daily use, thus being self-sufficient: the family head makes the baskets and the wife weaves the clothing for all members of the family. It must not be forgotten that public or private customers who are often an important element in the fosterage and development of art, were missing completely in Naga villages. Lack of raw material was an additional difficulty. The clay for pottery often had to be brought from far, the suitable wood for carving or for the fronts of the Houses of the Men had to be gathered in remote jungle areas, and Indian cane used for the most elaborate products could be found only in the thickest forests.

Some practices, such as depositing the belongings of the deceased in the tomb or hanging them over the burial site, have resulted in a damage and an impoverishment of the traditional art treasure. In this regard an episode occurred to me can be cited as an example: a man in an Ao village tried in vain to remember shape and size of a pair of earrings which had been buried in his grandfather’s tomb over forty years ago. Even today, in the Tuensang district spears, dao, elaborate
cloths, ornaments and headdressings are allowed to rot in wind and weather. And the same usage is followed by non-Christians throughout Nagaland.

A great part of Naga art was related to traditional religious beliefs and practices. Inevitably then, the spreading of a new religion, such as the Christian faith in the nineteenth century, led, along with the weakening of traditional religion, to the decline of many forms of art, foremost among them woodcarving which is as old as Naga history and completely related to the practice of headhunting and to the institution of the morung, the House of Men.

We are, no doubt, obliged to the American missionaries for the current revival of the Nagas. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the destructive influence they had on artistic manifestations in general, and particularly on their literature. From the moment of their conversion to the Christian faith people were no longer allowed to participate in dances or to sing traditional songs, and we have news of episodes of excommunication when this order was disobeyed. This fact has had a most detrimental effect on the maintenance and the flourishing of oral literature.

Headhunting is no longer practiced, but in the past it was the basis of Naga cultural and religious life. Taking a human head in a raid was considered a man’s greatest accomplishment and gave him the right to wear dresses and ornaments forbidden to others. Human heads were the prevalent motive of sculptures on beams and poles of the warrior’s houses and of the morung, and the decorations on village doors and on the warriors’ clothes show that headhunting was the principal source of inspiration for painting and graphic arts as well.

Sculptures and carvings made for propitiatory purposes and for reasons of prestige on the morung were another occasion to express artistic creativity. These buildings were the centre of important social activities. In Konyak society the morung coincides with the private dwelling of the Aug, the hereditary chief, but elsewhere it is the principal community building and more ornate and conspicuous than all the others. The morung’s function varies from one group to another, but basically it is a guardpost against possible enemy attacks, a dormitory for unmarried men, a meeting place, a centre for education, arts and discipline, and it plays an important ceremonial role. For generations the institution of the morung has had an enormous influence on the lives of the hill peoples, and its decline has meant that the plastic arts, pride of the Nagas, fell into oblivion and were eventually abandoned.

Human figures, tigers, elephants, hornbills, snakes and mithun heads decorated the structures of the morung as high-reliefs. For their realization daos, axes and chisels were used, and given the simplicity of the tools employed, the quality of this work is excellent. Sometimes the figures were coloured with blood and soot. The best sculptures came from the tribes of the extreme
North-East, and the most outstanding in this field were the Konyaks, universally considered the best Nagas sculptors. One of the subjects most frequently represented was the great Indian hornbill whose beak and feathers the Nagas looked at with respect because of their magic powers, and they were considered symbols of courage and splendour. Due to their importance head and tail of this bird were carved accurately in order to resemble as closely as possible the live model. Tigers and elephants were also represented as symbols of bravery, whereas the head of the mithun, a semi-domestic cattle, was considered an emblem of wealth. This animal was the centre of all those rituals known as the Feasts of Merit, in which the Nagas displayed their passion for splendour, colour and extravagance. The sacrifice of the mithun at the conclusion of this cycle of festivities credited the man who carried it out with honour and social prestige, and from this moment on he was entitled to wear special dresses and ornaments and he could decorate his house in memory of this honourable event.

The tribes in the North and in the centre of the Naga Hills associated enormous wooden drums with the morung and used them to celebrate victories and the capture of enemy heads, as well as during village feasts, at funerals of important men and during the solar and lunar eclipses. A different rhythm was used for each occasion, and the drum was beaten by a group of young men, each holding sticks in both hands. These drums, sometimes reaching ten metres in length and four in width, were obtained from the trunk of a single tree and modelled on one end like the bow of a canoe which in turn was shaped like a buffalo’s or a tiger’s head and terminated in a long tail on which the conductor of the drum-beaters sat. When well beaten the drum emitted a powerful sound which would rebound from one hill to the next and transmit information or love messages which could be recognized only by the beloved person. The primary function of these objects was that of a drum, but they were treated with the respect normally paid to divinities and considered depositaries of the importance and the life of a clan or a khel (part of a village) to which the morung belonged. Blood of sacrificed animals was spread on them with magic formulas.

According to G. Brown (1910: Melanesians and Polynesians) and F.E. William (1923: The Pairama Ceremony in the Puri Delta, Papua) the entire ceremony of building, transport to the village and inauguration of these huge drums is similar to that followed on the Fiji islands in the construction of war canoes which terminate in a head like the Naga drums and are beaten rhythmically by the crew with the palm of the oars. The Angamis and other Southern tribes do not possess tribal drums, but attribute equal importance to woodcarving and to the great wooden gates at the village entrance which defend access to it. Heads of mithuns, pigs or men,
feathers, ears of rice as symbol of prosperity and human figures in dancing costumes were carved on them either in high- or in bas-relief.

In traditional Naga art human figures are usually carved in small size and rather realistically. Erotic motives, such as representation of men or animals in the process of mating or of couples dancing or embracing each other allusively can be found on Konyak morungs. Tattoos or other features which underline their status are usually shown on the statues of warriors and they are often accompanied by their arms. Representations of women doing each other's hair can be frequently encountered. Gods, especially the good ones, are never represented, because the Nagas believe that divine spirit is everywhere and that respect for its creation is the best way to venerate it. Although a general idea exists of a good god, they do not pay much attention to him since he does not interfere with their lives.

Naga religion consists simply of a series of ceremonies which naturally lead to morally loyal and correct behaviour while respecting tradition at the same time. Consequently, there exists no worship of idols or tangible representations of ideas. At best representations of those malign spirits against which the Nagas have to fight all their life can be found, so that their mysterious powers will not bring bad luck to their villages, nor destroy their harvests or threaten their lives by illness. In accordance with this concept rites and sacrifices are directed towards these hostile and wicked spirits alone, against whom they have to protect themselves physically. This, however, does not mean that the Nagas are afflicted and oppressed by terrifying spirits or that they are incapable of distinguishing between good and bad. The necessary sacrifices are performed consciously and joyfully in order to appease the gods and to assure themselves good luck, always hoping for the best but accepting any outcome with resignation. Along with other factors, contacts with the market and with industrial textile products have led to changes in the art of weaving during the last few decades. Ornamental motives and representations of everyday objects are added to patterns, and in recent products native designs of the various tribes can be found side by side. All this has resulted in the loss of identity and of the meaning of a great part of the original symbols on shawls and skirts. In the past the members of the various Naga tribes wore different cloths each with specific characteristics, and it was not consented within one tribe to freely wear any shawl one preferred. In fact, the motives represented were not only attractive decorations, but a group of symbols indicating the status of an individual within the group.

Since decorations are the product of the combination of vertical (warp) and horizontal threads (weft) in traditional cloths, an angular-geometrical design is the result consisting basically of lines, stripes, squares and bands which sometimes have the more elaborate shape of diamonds or lozenges. These basic motives eluded monotony by an ever new combination and variety in colour and size, without needing to employ flowers or other invented ornamental motives which only disturb the clearness of the design, as it is commonly done today.

The range of Naga cloths varies from a simple white or black/blue cloth which can be worn by anyone to the elaborate shawl of a warrior or an elder whose use is subject to precise regulations. A few examples may be necessary in order to understand the social importance of the cloths and the various meanings attributed to them. A Chang warrior cloth, called mob nei, or shawl with cowries, could not be worn by a man who had taken less than six heads in
battle. Even before beginning its weaving, a ritual feasting period of three days (genna) had to be observed, during which the future holder could only eat the meat of a rooster which had been slaughtered expressly for this purpose. At the end of the weaving the cowries were attached to the cloth in circles or in the shape of human figures who represented the enemies killed. Among the Aos the rongsu was one of the most coveted cloths, and the right to wear it could be acquired only by a man whose family had completed the Feasts of Merit for three generations, that is, by the person who, after his father and grand-father, had personally effected the sacrifice of the mibun.

It was not easy to reach this status and much respect surrounded this piece of clothing in a land where wealth came and went very easily and where men often died before having completed the cycle of the Feasts of Merit.

Nagaland, like any other place on earth, is rapidly changing today, and its population has to face a crisis without precedent in its history. This change goes under the general name of modernization and consists in a new way of life, new roads, educational programmes and generally in a revolution of the socio-economic conditions fundamental for the villages. The tribes have been asked to stop fighting, and they are today united in a single organism which is the modern states of Nagaland to which the same loyalty must be demonstrated as was shown to their clans and to their villages for centuries.

This transformation has required and will continue to require a difficult process of psychological adaptation. In fact, the changes weigh heavily on the set of rules which controlled tribal life, social discipline, the integrity of family and community, culture and spiritual values, love of the arts and the concept of aesthetic pleasure.

Easier communication, access to markets, contacts with other populations have led to the import of many foreign products, and in many cases an inferiority complex arose with respect to these commercial products of the civilized world, which had a negative effect on care and development of the indigenous art. Enamelled plates and cups have substituted bamboo trays and jugs which were often delicately carved. Native clay cooking pots have been substituted by aluminium ones. Hymns have taken the place of the old songs and dances which are gradually being forgotten. The abolition of headhunting and the gradual disappearance of the Feasts of Merit have led to the decay of the morung as an institution and rendered the gates for the protection of the villages useless. The necessity to weave a particular cloth for a specific class of warriors or of eminent men is no longer felt and consequently many old textile designs have fallen into oblivion.
commercial colours. It was inevitable then, that Naga art declined as a consequence of these changes. But, for however great the pressure of these changes may be, it is our task now to safeguard the moral and cultural foundations of this society, if we want to prevent it from loosing the ties to its own roots. In order to achieve this goal, it will be necessary to maintain and to revitalize the traditional arts, so that the rich Naga culture will not be forgotten and its people not become men without a past.