



Photos by Metropolitan Museum of Art

A casket from Scotland, the Martens brooch: Also, the desecration of churches

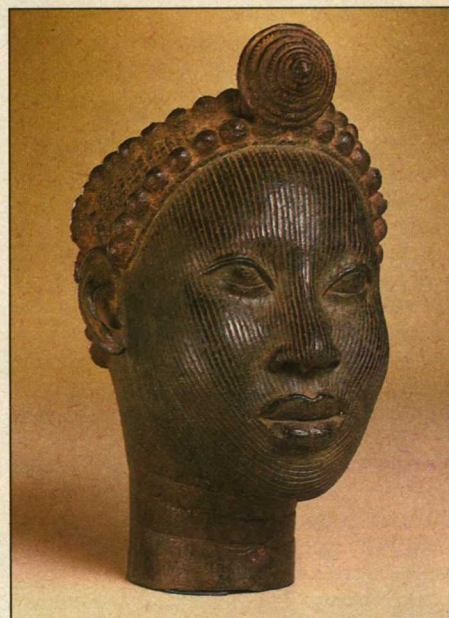
the exhibit provides plenty of myth-enforcing material. The boy inside everyone will cherish the young woman's skull on display—it is missing its back half, thanks, in all likelihood, to a Viking blade. And there is a wall label on which is printed an Arab's description of a Viking King's burial: "Then the old woman, whom they called the Angel of Death, took the hand [of a female slave] and made her enter the tent. Then men began to beat with their staves on shields so that her shrieks should

not be heard . . . Then six men went into the tent and laid the girl by the side of her dead master; then two took her legs, two took her hands"—but one mustn't reveal the punch line.

Of greater artistic consequence is *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria: 2,000 years*, also on view at the Met. This exhibit, organized by the Detroit Institute of Arts with material lent by the Nigerian Government, includes good examples of Benin

work, whose excellence has long been recognized. Most exciting, however, is the display of works from several other sculptural traditions in Nigeria, some newly uncovered. They prove that Nigeria, a vast country of about 76 million people with 250 languages and dialects, has an immensely rich and varied artistic tradition.

Legend: Of particular note are the Ife bronzes. These were cast from about the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries A.D. and are named for the royal city of Ife, which, according to legend, was the place where the gods descended from heaven on an iron chain to create the world. The heads, most of which are life-size, portray the Onis, or rulers, of the city. Made after the ruler's death, the bronzes originally bore the dead sovereign's crown. According to the catalog (161 pages. Knopf. \$11.95), the purpose was to show that "although the King was dead, the power of the office continued," much as the English say: "The King is dead, long live the King."



Museum of Ife Antiquities

An Ife head: 'Long live the King'

The bronzes are astonishingly realistic portraits. (They should alter the widely held view that African art includes only the expressionist and masklike figures that influenced Picasso.) At the same time, they have classical grace; their magnificent dignity—it is a truly royal detachment—transcends the particular. A convincing conjunction of the real and the ideal is found only in great art, and then only rarely. It is remarkable that most of the Ife bronzes have been found only in the last 40 years; probably the earliest discovery occurred in 1910, when a German ethnologist offered to buy one for £6 plus a bottle of Scotch. The authors of the catalog, Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, have a field which is still new to explore—and it promises to be a great one.

MARK STEVENS

The Treasures of Ancient Soho

One of the best of the new "civilization shows" is called *Splendors of the Sohites*, which is currently on view at the Metropolitan Container of Art in the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York. Organized by Prof. Sam Wiener, the exhibit displays the work of the "Soho" culture that flourished in Apple (or, as it is known in some contemporaneous histories, "Manhattan") around 1980.

Like many other primitive peoples, the Sohites had the magic touch: they appeared to turn everything into art. Their best work was the so-called "hermaphrodite" amulet (illustration); these ubiquitous charms, which were once shiny, have today a breath-taking patina. The Sohites, a fashion-conscious people, were superb weavers. They developed a magnificently textured, bluish material, which has, unfortunately, faded over the years. They decorated this material with shiny snaps, made mostly from a bronze alloy. (My principal quarrel with Professor Wiener is that he has not properly distinguished among vari-

ations within the style: we await an essay on the differences between "Levis," "Wrangler" and "Vanderbilt Gloria.")

Many Sohite artifacts are similar to objects in use today. The "De Soto Krater," for example, bears a marked resemblance to a wheel for a modern vehicle. But one must be careful not to be too sentimental or "literary" in this regard. A culture should be viewed in its own light and judged in its own terms. (The exhibition has no corporate sponsor.)

MARK STEVENS

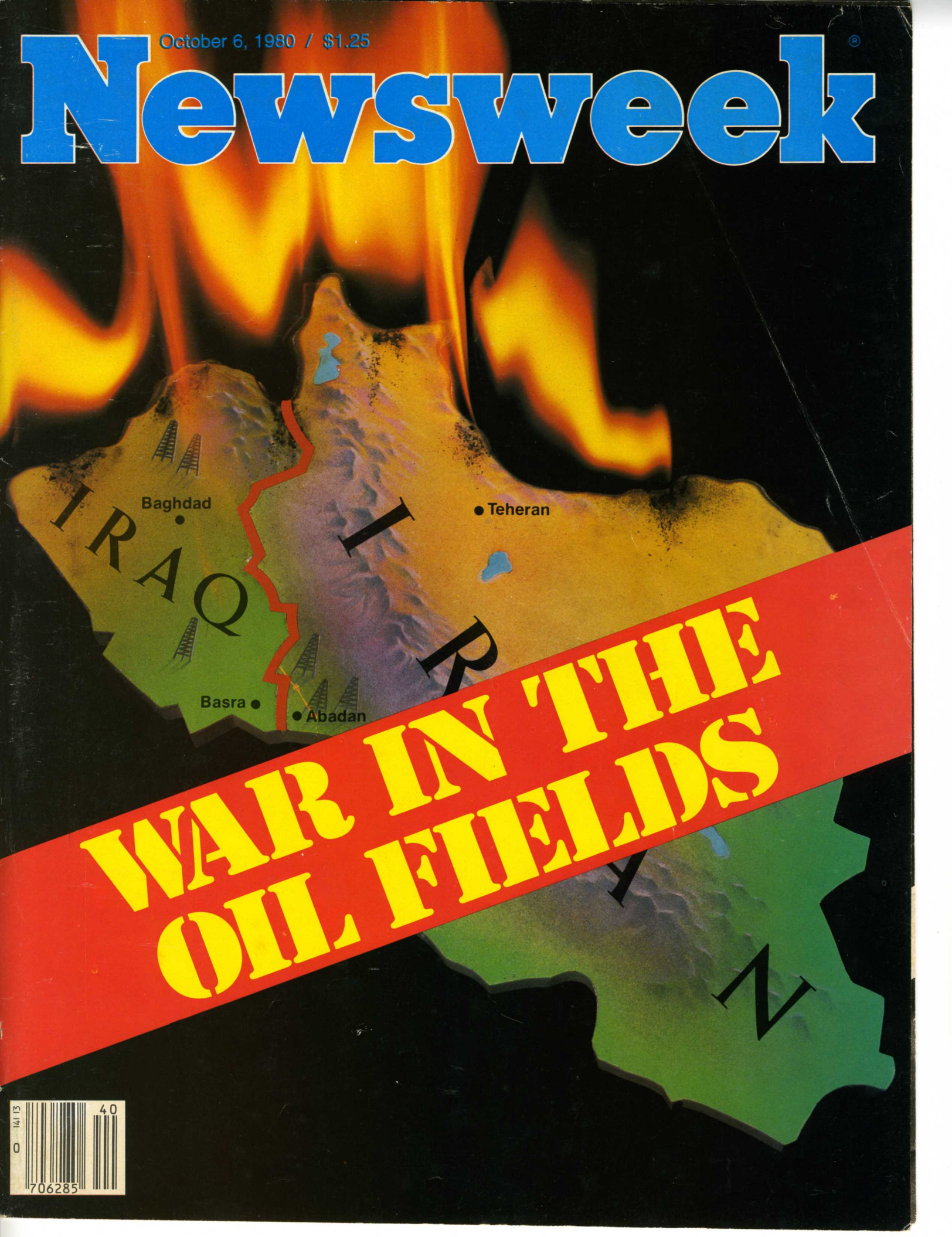
'Hermaphrodite' amulets: The fine patina of age

David Wiener



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