

Picasso and Africa: How African Art Influenced

Pablo Picasso and His Work

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Pablo Picasso was renowned as an innovative, artistic genius. His infinite creativity produced hundreds of works of art, many of which shocked and provoked, but subsequently transformed Modern art. From a young age, Picasso understood that in order to achieve greatness and to transcend the masters of the past he had to break from the formalities of classical painting and create new forms of expression. Picasso's desire for greatness compelled him to leave his home of Barcelona, Spain in 1901 and to move to Paris, the art capital of Europe. In Paris, Picasso was introduced to traditional African Art. African Art so profoundly affected Picasso that it provided the creative impetus he needed to create works that shed all conventions and enabled him to surpass his artistic rivals. Picasso was by no means the first to be influenced by non-western art, but he was the first to form a symbiotic relationship with the concepts of African Art and to create a new aesthetic language.

In the late nineteenth century, the colonization of the West and North Coasts of Africa by France as part of Europe's "Scramble for Africa" aided in the proliferation of African art in Paris. The "Scramble for Africa" which occurred between 1876 and 1912 was the annexation and division of the continent of Africa among seven nations of Europe: Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom

(Pakenham xxi). Expeditions and the travels of the French elite in search of riches and adventure also helped to bring African Art to Paris. Many homes, shops and museums displayed these newly found treasures. One such museum was the Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero (Goldwater 7). The Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero (now called the Musee de l'Homme) was built in conjunction with Paris' World's Fair in 1878. At the World's Fair the public was able to see for the first time "exotic" finds from Africa, the Americas and Oceanic Islands. This exhibit was so popular that it was decided that the Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero would be built to house the collection (Goldwater 7). Pablo Picasso would later view this exhibit at the Trocadero museum and it would have a profound effect on him and would prove to be pivotal to his art.

Exhibitions such as those found in Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero presented African Art as curiosities or as functional objects, not as works with any aesthetic value. European scholars and artists were reluctant to accept the art of Africa as "fine art" instead they were referred to as "primitive" (O'Riley 31). It was a general belief among these scholars that African Art was that of a primitive people, a sub-evolutionary group: the art of Africa and other non-European nations had "prime" elements, elements from which Western art had evolved. The term primitivism as it was applied to African art (and non classical art), was originally a positive one although it had negative connotations outside the art world. "It comes from the word *primitif*, a nineteenth-century French art-history word used in reference to certain late medieval and early Renaissance Italian and Flemish painters. Eventually the term was applied to African traditional art" (O'Riley 31). It was used to describe the expression of

uninhibited naiveté and freedom. Although there was reluctance to accept a different way of interpreting and rendering the natural world, artists who were later seduced by “primitive” art embraced this style of expression as means of release from the restraints of their own formal art theories (Grimaldi 375).

By the time of Pablo Picasso’s visit to the Trocadero museum in 1907, at the age of twenty-six, he had already achieved success with the paintings from his “Blue Period” and his “Rose Period”. In these original works, he showed that he had mastered the traditional techniques of drawing and form. The paintings of the “Blue Period” were characterized by a monochromatic blue-green tone. The series of paintings were influenced by the suicide of his friend Casagemas and the depression and guilt he felt over his loss. The “Rose Period” portrayed harlequins and other performers of the Cirque Medrano (Picasso frequented the circus when he first moved to Paris) (Bishop 394). Pablo Picasso’s success at this time was due to his primary patrons and friends Gertrude Stein, a wealthy American writer, and her brother Leo Stein. Gertrude Stein held weekly salons at home with Paris’ emerging writers and artists. At these gatherings Picasso met other French artists Maurice Vlaminck, Andre Derain and Henri Matisse. They were all part of the fauvist movement. Fauvism was an avant-garde art movement that employed unconventionally vivid and vibrant colors with bold brush strokes. Matisse who was the leader of this group was also considered the leader of Parisian art. Picasso and Matisse would develop an intense rivalry and close friendship. It is this rivalry that drove Picasso to seek out new ways to dethrone Matisse as the king of Parisian avant-garde. Ironically, it is Matisse that first introduced Picasso to African art. Picasso will eventually use the

concepts of African art to surpass Matisse and create a new form of artistic expression in Europe (Cowling 11).



Figure 1

Untitled (Seated Figure)

Vili, Democratic Republic of Congo

Wood and Glass

Formerly from Henri Matisse's Collection

Matisse has told the story of his purchase of a Vili figurine (from the Democratic Republic of Congo) (*Figure 1*) in the autumn of 1906 and the introduction of the piece to Picasso. He purchased the figurine from Emile Heymann, a supplier of “curiosities and weapons of savages”. Emile Heymann was familiarly called “le negrier de la rue de Rennes” and was the first and, for a while, the only dealer in Paris of African Art (brought back by army officers and settlers) (Grimaldi 378). Later that evening, at one of Gertrude Stein’s weekly gatherings, Matisse showed Picasso his newly acquired piece,

the first Picasso had ever seen. Matisse said that Picasso was “very impressed” by the sculpture and added, “We talked a long time about it and this was the beginning of all our interest in Negro art-interest which we have more or less shown in our paintings”

Gertrude Stein would later write about that introduction in her book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1913) (Goldwater 145). Max Jacob, a French writer who was also present recounted the following:

Matisse took a wooden statuette off a table and showed it to Picasso. Picasso held it in his hands all evening. The next morning when I came to his studio the floor was strewn with sheets of drawing paper. Each sheet had virtually the same drawing on it, a big woman’s face with a single eye, a nose too long that merged into a mouth, a lock of hair on one shoulder ... Cubism was born (Huffington 90).

Not only was Picasso impressed by the sculpture, but it also helped him to solve a dilemma he had with an unfinished portrait of Gertrude Stein. In 1905, Gertrude Stein sat ninety times for the portrait. Uninspired and dissatisfied, Picasso finally erased her face. It was not until months later that he returned to the painting. In 1906, newly inspired by the Congolese sculpture that Matisse had shown him, he painted Gertrude’s face without her being present with African mask-like features (*Figure 2*). When someone commented that Gertrude did not look like her portrait, Picasso answered, “She will” (Spurling 372). On the other hand, Matisse only used the sculpture once in an unfinished still life (*Figure 3*). Gertrude Stein had remarked how differently that moment of seeing that sculpture had affected the two painters:

The effect of this African art upon Matisse and Picasso was entirely different. Matisse through it was affected more in his imagination than in his vision. Picasso more in his vision than in his imagination (Stein 63).



Figure 2

Pablo Picasso

Gertrude Stein

Oil on canvas

1905-1906



Figure 3

Henri Matisse

Still Life with Negro Statuette

Oil on canvas

1906

In the same period of fall 1906, Picasso would also paint a life-size portrait of himself – *Self Portrait with Palette* (Figure 4) (Picasso’s later self -portrait in 1907 would show a stronger influence of African art (Figure 5)). It was in a similar fashion to Gertrude Stein’s painting. These were radical changes from his Rose Period. Mask-like and vacant, these portraits were the beginning of Pablo Picasso’s path of artistic metamorphosis that would culminate in the groundbreaking and audacious *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907) (Figure 6) (Mailer 214).



Figure 4
Self Portrait
Oil on canvas
1906

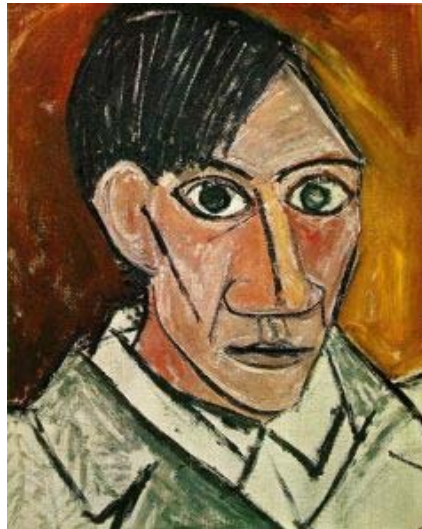


Figure 5
Self Portrait
Oil on canvas
1907



Figure 6

Les Femmes d'Alger

Oil on canvas

1907

Les Femmes d'Alger was described as “the ever-glowing crater from which the fire of contemporary art erupted” by Andre Salmon, a French art critic. It was considered as the “great manifesto of modernist painting” (Bishop 391). Picasso indeed intended for this painting to be his revolutionary manifesto. It would be proof that he could surpass his contemporaries and establish himself as the leader of the Parisian avant-

garde. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* was believed to be Picasso's answer to Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-1906) (Figure 7). At the Salon des Indépendants (an exhibition of emerging and established artists in Paris), Matisse had taken command of the evening with his enormous painting *Le Bonheur de Vivre*. "It was huge in its scope and ambitious intent" (Mailer 242). Norman Mailer in his book about Picasso wrote about the reaction to *Le Bonheur de Vivre* and how the success of Matisse that evening spurred Picasso to seek a new form of expression that led him to paint *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*:

The painting (*Le Bonheur de Vivre*) was remarkable for its unloosed sensuality, its unloosed color its unloosed physical scale, its unloosed imagination...The Salon crowd found the work extreme and strange even hilarious and these reactions must have impressed Picasso as did the intensity of the vituperation.

The witnessing of this, including Leo Stein's purchase and fervent adulations of *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, must have propelled Picasso toward the radical departure of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*. If Matisse could gain such praise and attention from his contemporaries by what he had achieved with color then Picasso felt that the only thing left to revolutionize was form by deconstructing form. If traditional paintings for centuries have been the balanced interaction of color and form,



Figure 7

Henri Matisse

Oil on Canvas

1906

Matisse had succeeded in liberating the first “the Spaniard was bound to apotheosize the other.” African Art would help Picasso with the concept of abstracted form. The inspiration for this concept would occur at his momentous visit to the Trocadero Museum (Mailer 243).

Although Picasso had seen African Art before, it was not until his visit to the Trocadero museum that he was truly confronted by it. This visit would have a profound impact on his work and revolutionize modern art. The revelation of deconstructed forms of African sculptures would be manifested in *Les Femmes d'Avignon*. Years later Picasso spoke to the French writer and statesman Andre Malraux about the visit to the Trocadero:

All alone in that awful museum, the masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins.

Les Femmes d'Avignon must have come to me that very day, but not because of the

forms; because it was my first exorcism painting-yes absolutely... When I went to the old Trocadero, it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell. I was alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I understood that it was very important: something was happening to me... The masks were not like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. But why weren't the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean? Those were primitives, not magic things. The Negro pieces were *intercesseurs*, mediators; ever since then I've know the word in French. They were against everything- against unknown threatening spirits...I understood; I too am against everything. I too believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! Everything! I understood what Negroes used their sculpture for. Why sculpt like that and not some other way? After all they are not Cubists! Since Cubism did not exist. It was clear that some guys had invented the models, and others had imitated them...isn't that what we call tradition? ... They were weapons to help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious, emotion-they were all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. (Huffington 90)

Les Demoiselles d 'Avignon was painted in two stages. The original concept was of women in a brothel like the ones Picasso visited in Barcelona. No fewer than eight hundred and nine studies were made which also included a sailor and a visiting medical student. After the Trocadero visit he completely reworked his idea. Instead of alluring female nudes, he created aggressive, deconstructed, angular forms with mask-like faces that fused with a sharp yet flattened two-dimensional plane. Unlike Renaissance masters, he had removed all concepts of perspective. The women were pressed against the front of the canvas as if to step out of the painting and accost the viewer (Cowling 18).

The two styles of African sculpture that had impacted *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* were coppered covered reliquary figures from the Bakota (a.k.a. Kota) people of African state of Gabon (*Figure 8*) and masks from the Dan people from the Ivory Coast (*Figure 9*) (Goldwater 147). The Dan mask influence can be seen in the two figures to the right of the painting (along with their studies). The women have long ridge-like noses enhanced by elongated protruding chins with small almost non-existent mouths. They have striation along the nose and side of the face that created a flat plane except for the forehead. Their features are reduced to geometric shapes. This indicated that Picasso had indeed studied these masks and to some degree emulated their styles. The Bakota sculpture also influenced the shape and shading of the faces, giving them exaggerated ovoid forms. The shape of the forehead and eyes and a simple ear suggests similarities to the Bakota sculptures. It is evident that the characteristic bold shape of the nose, eyes and shadowing that are in *Les Femmes d'Alger* are most likely taken from African art (Cowling 18).



Figure 8

Bakota Reliquary Figure

Wood, brass/copper

Gabon, Africa



Figure 9

Dan Mask

Wood

Dan Tribe, Ivory Coast

Les Femmes d'Alger was the embodiment of Picasso's rebellion. He destroys the Western ideals of beauty and dismisses the Renaissance's centuries old concept of perspective. The women of the painting are pushed forward against the canvas. They parade themselves and stare directly at the viewer. They are formidable and confrontational. The viewer had now become the client of these intimidating prostitutes. Picasso created a new language that overthrew the accepted formalities of Renaissance's rendering of the human form. It was a combination of Cezanne's approach

to the faceted forms of nature and the ingenuity and power Picasso revered in African art. This would set the foundation and give birth to Cubism (Patrick 388).

Acceptance and appreciation for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* evaded Picasso even by his closest friends and contemporaries. George Braque (co-founder of the Cubist movement) said in regards to the painting, “Your painting makes one feel as if you were trying to make us eat cotton waste and wash it down with kerosene” (Leal 118). Andre Derain predicted that one day Picasso would be “found hanged behind his great canvas.” Matisse denounced it as “a hoax and an outrage, an attempt to ridicule the modern movement” (Karmel 28). It is difficult to imagine now how radical this painting was. It was the antithesis of everything that was considered to be beautiful. His friends and critics found the painting appalling and beyond their understanding. Although it would later be known as a defining masterpiece of modern art, the *Femmes d'Alger* would not be shown to the public for many years.

Drawn to the magic of African art, Picasso became an avid collector of masks and “fetishes”. He scoured shops and flea markets. Soon, his studio was piled high with them (Cowling 18). “The hunt for African works became a real pleasure for him” (Goldwater 147). The influence of African art on Picasso’s work continued. This period was referred to as “Epoque Negre” or his African period. There are some parallels to be made with some of the work of this period and specific styles of African sculptures; some that may be considered less influential and more borrowing. For example, distinct parallels can be drawn with Picasso’s *Standing Nude* (1907) (*Figure 10*) and Senufo (tribe of the West Coast of Africa) wooden sculptures from the Ivory Coast (*Figure 11*).

Standing Nude was a study for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Although they were both meant to portray the female form, the woman in the painting is angular as if carved with an axe (Goldwater 34). They both have similar cone-like breasts and an elongated hatched face. To represent the female form in this way was unheard of. Artist of the time such as Matisse took great pride in representing the standard curvaceous female nude.



Figure 10
Standing Nude
Oil on canvas
1907



Figure 11

Senufo Statue (Ivory Coast)

Wood

The Dancer (1907) (Figure 12) can be compared to the Bokota reliquary statue. The arms of the image have been brought behind the head to surround the face that is similar to its African counterpart. The right leg is actively being pushed against the left leg. The hatched surface of the metal (a technique used by many traditional African artists called “scarification” and is utilized frequently by Picasso) is reflected in the surface shading of the face and body of the painting (Goldwater 150). However similar, Picasso’s painting had achieved movement that fully engaged the viewer in contrast to the lifeless and impersonal Bakota figure (Goldwater 150). The pose in *The Dancer* that was influenced by the Bakota figure (bent leg with hands behind the head) is used frequently in Picasso’s art during that period (1907-1909) was used to enhance the

confrontational display of the two center figures of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Goldwater 150).
(Goldwater 150).



Figure 12

Dancer

Oil on canvas

1907



Bakota Reliquary Figure

Wood, brass/copper

Gabon, Africa

Nude with Drapery (1907) (Figure 13) continues the influence of the Bakota sculpture and the theme of movement. Movement is achieved in the background of the painting by a series of diagonal lines and shading of triangular shapes across the canvas. Movement is expressed in the body by the bent arms and legs and by the diagonal tilt of the head. It is the last of the series featuring the raised arm, bent leg and hatched shadowing. The fusion of the background with the figure with hatching was not only the influence of the Bakota sculpture, but was most likely inspired by dog-toothed scarifications of masks and wooden reliefs. This could be considered a link to African art and their artists (Cowling 22)



Figure 13

Nude with Drapery

Oil on canvas

1907



Figure 14

Friendship

Oil on Canvas

1907

Dan masks from the Ivory Coast that influenced *Les Femmes d'Alger* also provided inspiration in other works. For example, the Dan mask form is replicated in *Friendship* (1908) (*Figure 14*). The shapes of the heads are ovoid, but broad and the cheeks are concave. The nose is set back from the mouth. The faces are free of volume and emphasize concavity (Goldwater 155). Within the two forms in *Friendship*, one can see Cubism taking shape. The forms are deconstructed into basic geometrical shapes; two-dimensional forms are blended with the two-dimensional background with the help of monochromatic color (Goldwater 155).

The painting of *Les Demoiselles* was the advent of Cubism. Forms and backgrounds are deconstructed and analyzed. Natural forms are reduced to planes, angles and geometric shapes. Only the abstracted essence of the figure remains. Similarly, in African masks, the face would be a receded plane away from the features, the forehead generally would have prominent shelf-like overhang and the features were reduced to abstracted shapes. The eyes would be cubic, cylindrical or clam-shaped and the nose would be a vertical rectangle and the mouth, a simple horizontal line or square (Goldwater 159). It was left to the viewer to use their imagination to supply the naturalistic volume and the mass that the sculptor had deliberately omitted. This technique employed by Picasso and Braque became known as Analytical Cubism. The link between African sculpture and Cubism was made by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, a nineteenth century art historian, who remarked in his writings about a Wobe mask from the Ivory Coast (*Figure 15*) that Picasso owned at the time. He felt that Picasso was attracted to the abstract transparency of the masks and it is “this transparency that led to the transparent planes of cubism”. He also states that further proof may be in Picasso’s *Guitar* (1912) (*Figure 16*) where the sunken hole of the instrument is expressed by a projecting cylinder (a positive shape), just as the Wobe mask cylinders are used to express the eyes (a recessed form). The African artist reversed the natural appearance of forms by making concave what was in reality convex. This discovery, Kahnweiler believed freed sculpture from naturalism and signs were used instead to enable the freedom from mass and enhance the sense of transparency (Goldwater 160)



Figure 15
Wobe Masks
Wood and metal
Ivory Coast



Figure 16

Guitar

Cardboard, string and wire

1912

The second phase of cubism was called Synthetic Cubism. During this period, Picasso continued to draw inspiration from African Art, but more of a summary and concept than use of a specific style. The concept of the use of signs to describe reality became an issue of discussion as Picasso's work became more abstract. Picasso would start with a basic drawing of a face, for example, and then he would deconstruct it by separating it into different geometrical shapes. He would then reassemble these shapes only after removing the naturalistic link of each feature by displacing and overlapping them, making the form distorted. Picasso however, would leave signs as clues for the viewer to use. According to Kahnweiler, "Painting and sculpture were forms of writing and that the final product was a distortion of the external world and not a mirror image"

(Karmel 100). Kahnweiler associated this idea with Picasso and his acquisition of a Wobe mask (from the Ivory Coast) in 1912. Picasso had realized that, although the face of the mask had been reduced to a flat plane of a series of geometric shapes, the viewer could still tell it was a face. The geometrical shapes would serve as signs, points to decipher the form of the painting or sculpture (Karmel 100). In *Woman in an Armchair* (1913) (*Figure 17*), the features of the face are depicted by a series of geometrical shapes or abstract forms. Dots and circles were painted for eyes and straight lines for the nose and mouth. These were frequent techniques used by Pablo Picasso in Synthetic Cubism and was probably derived from the study of the Wobe mask that he owned. “The upper breasts with their peg-like nipples, strongly reminiscent of certain conventions employed in African art appear to nail in place the oversized pendulous projections below” (Penrose, 87)



Figure 17

Woman in Armchair

Oil on canvas

1913

During this period sculpture became a new medium for Picasso. He attempted to make use of his limited carving abilities in hopes of achieving the same sense of freedom he admired in African Art. The largest of such carvings is *Figurine* (1909). Picasso broke with centuries old tradition of sculpture as rendering of the natural world. Picasso's debt to African sources is evident again in *Head of a Woman* (1909) (*Figure 18*). It is considered the first Cubist sculpture. Picasso transfers his new technique to a new medium by breaking down the planes of the anatomy into a series of faceted forms (Penrose 130). It opened the way for sculptors of the twentieth century to access a freedom that was not available to them until that point (Grimaldi 143).



Figure 18

Head of a Woman

Plaster

1909

The style used on the face is comparable to *Woman with Fan (1909)* (Penrose, 128). The direct influence of African works becomes less evident. Picasso is now focused on the concepts of African art: the fact that African Art did not represent forms from the natural world, but created new ways in which to present the human body.

Picasso was fascinated by what he called the sacred and the magical power of African art. He said that it changed his approach to painting and enabled him to be a mediator. He described African art as a “form of mediation between artists and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them.” It was a form of magic used to conquer our terrors by giving it form (O’Riley 30). Pablo Picasso adopted the bold unfettered expression of African artists. Traditional African Art inspired Pablo Picasso to create new ways of thinking about beauty and form. He used their sense of aesthetic freedom to transform his work and revolutionize modern art.

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