

## Picasso's World and the African Connection

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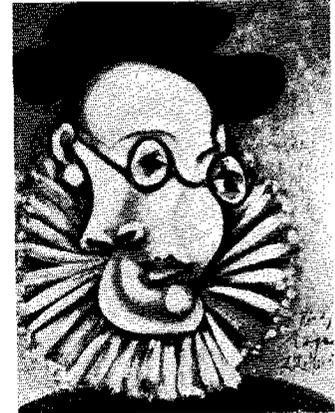
This article, reprinted from *Icarus: New Writings from Around the World* 13, Winter 1994, gives a small sample of the slide presentation which made up Part II of Mr. Robbin's 1990 Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture. (See *GSB* #60, p.32.)

Since the first decade of this century, the art of pre-industrial, non-Western cultures, primarily African, has had an undeniable and increasingly apparent impact on the Western aesthetic. One can find evidence of African influence in the principle art movements of twentieth-century Europe and America — German Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism — as well as reverberations in contemporary developments.

This influence was transmitted subtly via the Moorish culture of North Africa and Spain. Pablo Picasso's mother was Arabic; Picasso once declared to André Malraux: "I am a brother of the Black Fetishists." It was also conveyed with the "souvenirs" that sailors, explorers, colonizers, missionaries, or ethnologists brought back from Africa, many of which eventually found their way into the ethnological museums and curio shops of Europe. The influence of traditional African sculpture upon Western art has been pervasive both in form and design and at deeper levels of the aesthetic concepts behind the art.

Scholars steeped in the restricted traditions of European art have finally begun to take note of Aesthetic relationships between Western and non-Western art, if not yet to acknowledge the full extent to which Western art has drawn literally and liberally from other cultures. Others have recognized this influence with greater conviction. *Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes, for example, went so far as to state in *The Shock of the New* that Picasso plundered African art. Hughes likened Cubism to a "dainty parody of the imperial model. The African carvings," he wrote, "were an exploitable resource, like copper or palm-oil, and Picasso's use of them was a kind of cultural plunder."

Some today in the field of art history pass the subject off as old hat. Others seek to uphold modern artists' reputation for originality by denying the significance of what I would term the "cultural imperialism" of Africa on the waning creativity of end-of-the-century Europe. But for



Pablo Picasso's "Portrait of Jaime Sabartes."



Mask, Igbo People, Nigeria



Picasso's "Head of a Woman With Blue Hat."

many more people — the vast numbers of bewildered and curious patrons of the museums of twentieth-century art — the discovery of the catalytic role of so-called primitive art has been a revelation.

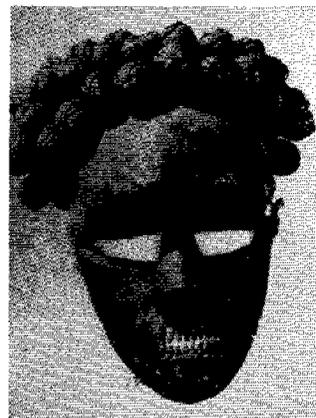
The first scholarly investigation of the relationship of the two art forms was a book published in 1938, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* by Professor Robert Goldwater of New York University, who served subsequently as director of Nelson Rockefeller's Museum of Primitive Art before it became part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But the relationship between non-Western art and Western art did not begin to attract much public attention until 1948 when the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London mounted the exhibition "40,000 years of Modern Art." Subsequently, a number of smaller shows were exhibited in Germany and elsewhere.

Then in 1972, the exhibitions "World Cultures and Modern Art" was mounted in Munich in conjunction with the Olympic Games. The exhibition addressed the assimilation of Asian influence into the Western visual and performing arts. One section of this exhibition, organized by Manfred Schneckenberger, focused on the arts of Africa, Oceania, and what Schneckenberger called "Indo-America."

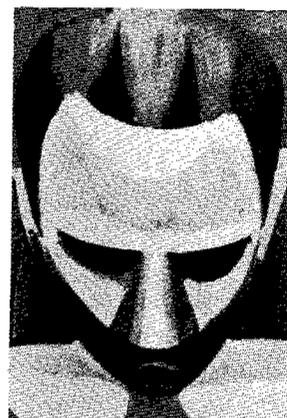
Another significant step toward greater public understanding was a highly instructive 1981 exhibition, "Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture," organized by Alan Wilkinson at the Art Gallery of Toronto. A modest display on the same theme, juxtaposing original graphics and lithographic reproductions of Western works with traditional African carvings was maintained from 1967 to 1982 at the Museum of African Art in Washington, DC.

However, it was the 1984-85 exhibition "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art — Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" that caused public awareness of this issue to gain momentum. Shown at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York and the Detroit and Dallas museums, this highly publicized exhibition was as controversial as it was dramatic; as much criticized — frequently for the wrong reasons — as it was praised. It featured a discriminating selection of the very finest examples of non-Western, particularly African art, to be found. As an unintended by-product, it brought home to the uninitiated viewer how far superior many of the African objects were to the Western works with which they were juxtaposed. It was perhaps the most important exhibition of African art *per se* that had ever been assembled.

The exhibition dealt primarily with the remarkable *affinities* between revolutionary works by Western artists, conceived and viewed in a strictly aesthetic context, and the highly disciplined traditional works of tribal carvers, made and utilized in a spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic



*Salampasu people. Mask*



*Pablo Picasso. Head of Man. Oil, 1908*



*Lega people, Zaire. Mask.*



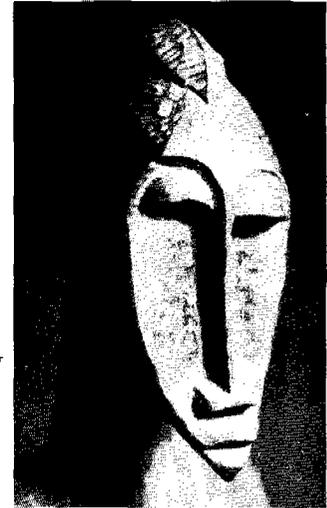
*Paul Klee. Maid of Saxony. Oil, 1922*

realm far from that of the Western world. What the exhibition did not succeed in doing, however, was to reflect adequately the extent of *direct derivation* from African art in so many of the Western works represented in the show. This shortcoming was perhaps a result of a scholarly distrust of the “merely visible” and too great a readiness to dismiss what were regarded as “banal resemblances” as being of little or no significance. A number of the works that were included in the MOMA exhibition to suggest direct influence were justifiably criticized as being too much a matter of conjecture to be convincing — this despite the fact that there was and is an abundance of irrefutable examples of forms and ideas directly derived from African art that can be drawn upon for purposes of illustration.

The significance of direct derivation from African forms has been played down not so much because of the real danger of attributing to African art borrowings that actually derive from other facets of the Western cultural tradition. Nor has it been so much because of the likelihood that the resemblances between African art and modern art are a result of a historical coincidence — with key developments or discoveries occurring simultaneously in different parts of the world independently of one another.\* Nor has direct derivation been ignored in favor of another explanation, psychologist Carl Jung’s concept of the “collective unconscious,” which holds that certain archetypal forms are universal, appearing in all cultures. In my opinion, direct derivation has been neglected because Western scholars and critics have been disinclined to investigate visual clues that would lead to documentation of a startling hypothesis: that the true source of so many aesthetic devices and ideas passed off as original in the Western frame of reference is African art,

The situation is complicated by the interdisciplinary nature of this field. Africanists, though intimately acquainted with the highly disciplined elemental nuances of African styles, are more concerned with their responsibility to record and evaluate African art and artifacts as physical manifestations of the customs and values of fast-disappearing cultures.

Western art historians, on the other hand, having only a superficial acquaintance with the stylistic elements and devices of African art, do not find what they do not know. Furthermore, they do not apply the same exacting standards to their investigations of non-Western art that they expect of themselves within the Western aesthetic tradition. They pass



*Semufo, Côte d'Ivoire.  
Detail of Figure.*



*Pablo Picasso, Sketch. "Les  
Demoiselles d'Avignon,"  
1907.*

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\*Pierre Daix, a leading historian of Cubism and personal friend of Picasso, attributed certain similarities between Cubist art and African art to “chance resemblances” and wrote an essay entitled “There is No Negro Art in ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,’” referring to Picasso’s controversial painting. He later recanted the opinion expressed in that article.

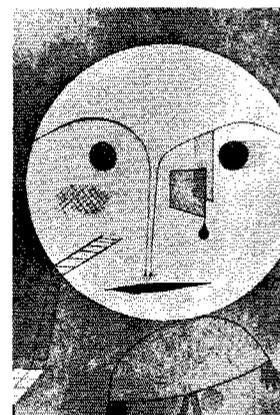
over and pass on, unwittingly, the historical inexactitudes that have been put forth at various times, for various reasons, by historians, critics, or artists themselves. Thus they give compounded credence to them through repetition. Meanwhile they often ignore statements such as that of Picasso's roommate and intimate friend, the poet Max Jacob, who said "Cubism was born of Negro art." Maurice de Vlaminck, reputedly the first "discoverer" of African art among the European artists, wrote: "The so-called renaissance of modern art is nothing more than a bastard arrangement of Negro art. In order to recover their youth, the elect of our civilization who no longer have anything to say, have grasped greedily at the art of these alleged savages..." André Derain, co-founder along with Vlaminck and Henri Matisse of the art movement called Les Fauves (The Wild Beasts), bought the now famous *Fang* mask from Vlaminck for fifty francs. Regarding this mask, Derain said: "Picasso has seen my Negro mask. As soon as he returned home, he copied it. He is aware of everything; he copied everything. The greatest creator of forms of this century is an imitator."

There is, of course, far more to be said about the complicated relationship of the two art forms and more importantly, about what was done with ideas and devices appropriated from African art. Therein lies one aspect of the significance of the modern art movements: Each of them taught us to perceive our inherited environment in new and nonhabitual ways and to understand better the intellectual evolution of the human being.

Traditionally and invariably, the principal criterion for establishing the fact of direct derivation in the field of art has been historical documentation — the artists owned a particular object or saw it in a museum or even in a book. *Might have seen* is not enough. But in the absence of documentation, when a substantial number of specific stylistic elements are present in a single Western work, or a characteristic African style exists in a series of works by a particular Western artists — that, I maintain, constitutes what in a court of law would be termed "demonstrable evidence." If the visual clues are unique or numerous enough, they should hold up in the court of art history and the conclusions to be drawn from them should be deemed valid. Valid, that is, until such time as it can be demonstrated conclusively that a certain object could not have been a source of derivation because it — or even a picture of it — *could not have been present* in Europe at the time a Western art work was created. The evidence of directly derived forms constitutes what Juan Gris, co-inventor along with Picasso and Georges Braque of Cubism, called "signposts along the way," pointing directly to African sculpture on the road traveled toward modern art.



*Ashanti Figure, Ghana*



*Paul Klee, 1930*

To acknowledge that so many early modern artists drew heavily and literally from African art does not necessarily denigrate their contributions to modern art and to modern understanding. For in so drawing, they translated it into their own work, interpreting it aesthetically with their own visual statements. Thus, such artists have served in effect as visual ethnohistorians.

Nor does heavy borrowing necessarily detract from the genius of modern artists. Who is to deny the genius of Picasso — who probably drew upon everything that he ever saw to feather his own aesthetic nest. (His very name “Picazo,” as it was spelled in Arabic, means “magpie.”) Perhaps Picasso’s uncanny ability to take in and reconstruct for his own purposes forms drawn from all cultures is the true manifestation of his very genius. He was a synthesizer of untold sensitivity and vision.

All art is, of course, derivative — either from nature or from prior art. Direct derivation is not only unavoidable but perfectly legitimate. In fact, there is today a school of art known as “appropriation art.” What is done with what is derived determines whether an artist’s work is significant, and that is up to the aestheticians to debate — if not to decide.

In not recognizing or acknowledging directly derived forms, art historians and critics fall short in their responsibilities to help keep each age informed and conversant with the past. But even more important today — when cross-cultural awareness and understanding become vital for survival — they fail to keep us apprised of the universal creativity of humankind in whatever culture and form it finds expression.



*Igbo people, Nigeria, Mask.*



*Pablo Picasso.*



*Mossi people, Burkina Faso.  
Detail, antelope mask.*



*Henry Moore. Sculpture,  
Large Totem Head, 1968.*