

Black african race
through picasso's
primitivism modern
painting: les
demoiselles...



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The emerged ' Primitivism' African art styles reinforced the development of the modern Western painting. The term ' Primitivism' is used to describe the ' primitive' cultures and races of the Eastern region, or more specifically the ' yellow' Asian and ' black' African, through the scope of Western ' white' nations. This paper will analysis the connection between the modern primitivism painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907) by Picasso to the artist's historical connection with the African people. As well as comprehend why primitivism was so important to the evolution of modern Western art styles despite the natural bias on African arts and the segregation between Eastern and Western race. Perhaps the creative art evolutions have reached to an end, or maybe the modern or postmodern artistic founding is unappealing to the viewers and collectors of the 20th centuries, or simply because the novelty of ancient art styles are ultimately the most progressive and creative styles compared to the newer styles. The infamous modernist primitivism painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* uncovers the reality of the white world's perception of the racialized, stereotyped, underdeveloped, commonly generalized, and ' ugly' black African peoples through the use of naked women covered with African masks, and distorted into an unwelcoming body shape.

The Use of Primitive Style in Modern Arts

The idea of Oriental arts as primitive and Western arts as modern and exceptional suggests the imbalance of superiority and importance between the two different styles of arts. Yet the main motivation behind modern arts is the ' primitive' arts. According to Gikandi,

Africa is first acknowledged as a significant episode in the history of modernism, and then it is quickly dispatched to the space of primitivism, a place where it poses no danger to the purity of modern art. However, there is a second, even more interesting explanation, namely that the practitioners of modernism had themselves started the process of containment, that they needed the primitive in order to carry out their representational revolution, but that once this task had been accomplished, the Other needed to be evacuated from the scene of the modern so that it could enter the institutions of high art.[1]

In the West, Africa arts are considered impure and underdeveloped. They are seen as irrational and savage, therefore a disgrace to the organized, well-developed, and advanced western art.[2]Once they have been manipulated, used for the benefits of European arts, they are quickly disregarded, disrespected, and forgotten. Picasso's *Demoiselles* evidently exposed the aspect of Western art with the influence of a 'primitive' style, yet he proclaimed his works' irrelevancy to African art. Although it is evidently false due to its obvious relation to African cultures and arts, it demonstrates a metaphor to the identity of the different races, and their assimilation into the dominant West European culture, similar to how African arts merged into the modern style of European arts.

Correlation Between Art and Race

Like the adaptation of African arts into European arts; the African people learn to familiarize themselves and co-exist within the dominant society, through assimilation and constructivism. By merging their social aspects and

identities together, the Africans form the primitivism in society, while the Europeans become the leading development that shapes the society's future, in this case, the modernism. Yet despite the primitive race becoming unrecognized in the European communities, they are actually " a kind of litmus test for revealing some of the fundamental assumptions operating within [the] dominant cultural institutions." [3] Also, the hidden " radical doctrine" suggested by Hayden White, which reveals the corrupted social system that the developed nations contain. Thus, the term " primitivist ideal", the rising of the rebellious New World natives whom claims their own superiority and the rights to rule simply because the representation of civilization, and their social status similar to the bourgeoisie. [4] As Leighton points out that " the Demoiselles d'Avignon cannot be discussed in terms of ' primitivism' without coming up against issues of power and of race, but also to bring out the important to such a discussion of stylistic and cultural confrontation." [5] In Leighton's comprehension, Picasso' Demoiselles brings out the reality of cultural conflicts between the white and the ' peoples of color.' Reflecting on the constant struggles of Western arts using ' primitivism' as the next staircase to a new evolution that often receives criticisms.

Racism, Stereotype, and Prejudice Against Black

Through Picasso's works, especially his famous *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, are seen as the modern ' primitivism' painting that is heavily influenced by African arts and tribal masks. He constantly rejected the acknowledgements of African art style influences on his works.

For the past two decades, critics have repeatedly explored and, it seems, empathetically re experienced the artist's fears while discounting the more justified pain of those his art would exorcise, namely his declared " enemy," women, and his undeclared enemy, peoples of color - whom he erased or diminished in other ways, by denying the influence of their visual culture on his work.[6]

It is due to the undeniable racism that exists in their society in which artists including Picasso, fears. Resulted in what Michele Wallace said, " a white world is simply unable to admit that art from Africa and elsewhere in the third world had a direct and profound influence on Western art because of absolutely uncontrollable racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism." [7] Because of the intense racism and the prejudice against African race, art, and culture; artists were strictly pressured by public speech of African influences in any aspects of life and arts. Although Picasso showed little interest in Africans as human beings, but was actually intrigued by African arts and tribal masks. This resulted in the natural assumption that he perceived African individuals as mere objects instead of as a person. From a fellow African artist, William's experience upon meeting Picasso for the first time, "[he] was disappointed that he was appealing to Picasso merely as an object or subject of art, not as an artist, not as a body, not even as a human subject." [8] Which could lead to possible misunderstanding that he was racist and ignorant in his usage of African styles in his paintings. According to Feneon, " cultural background is not essential to correct aesthetic appreciation and analysis: good art. The masterpiece, is universally recognizable." [9] Thus, African art were automatically recognized as flawed

and dishonourable because it could taint the perfect modern Western art style.

Not only have racism became a huge concern for individual freedom of speech and their representation in art styles; stereotypes have also become a major issue for the African citizens living in the Western regions. "Rubin has noted a tendency in early twentieth century France to lump together under the single simplistic concept of the 'primitive,' the African, the Oceanic, and indeed anything that could be considered especially remote in cultural terms." [10] As Rubin has pointed out the fact that Western regions simply gather all Orientals into a single category of 'primitivism,' it reveals the laziness, the unwillingness, and the lack of effort by the West to carefully identify and recognize the Eastern regions in their singular culture, religion, and tradition. Only because of their common racial appearance, the West simply "lumped" all Eastern countries as one 'primitive' identity. Even in the painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* by Picasso, appearances of the women painted are stereotyped as "light-skinned, [and] critics often differentiate the two with African-looking masks as distinctly ugly, bestial, and dirty on contagion-ridden - that is, with all the scathing stereotypes that have so long dogged dark-skinned peoples." [11] It is funny how the demoiselles are painted in a non-classical style that portrays them in a very scandalous way, however, the two women on the right-hand side with the African masks drew the most attention due to their ugliness, frightening, and oriental face. This also leads to the inevitable negative stereotypes that 'black' individuals (not just women) must confront in their everyday lives.

Social Fear of the White Against Black

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The unavoidable social conscious fear about white degenerating and becoming dominated by the overpopulation of black is evidently displayed in Picasso's painting. "A term such as "decivilizing," for instance, applied to *Demoiselles*." 11 As mentioned before, the civilization was only meant for the bourgeoisies or the white, thus any other races and their cultures would be considered uncivilized and unfit for society. Especially the African race, which was recognized as the black taint within the white European society, therefore decivilizing. And because of the constant black population growth in the Western region, the Europeans eventually became uncertain in their capability to maintain their superiority and purity. As the cubist painting reveals the "fear that spirals through Western society from the late nineteenth century to the present: the fear of women and outside, including peoples of color..." have all contributed to the threat that still lurks in societies today.[12] Rhetoric critics have also described the *Demoiselles'* body shapes where it "seems to betray a fear of the decline of the West spelled by the breaching of Western borders by others - an irrational fear" since the powerful Western continent have indeed invaded and stolen land from the East. 12 Also, their ideology to persuade African into primitivism in order elevate their own status without the fear of racial overthrow.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon and Venus Anadyomene

According to Rubin, "'Africa' faces express more... than just the 'barbaric' character of pure sexuality... their violence alludes to Woman as Destroyer - vestiges of symbolist *femme fatale*.'" [13] In Picasso's painting, the *Demoiselles* are visually presented in a masculine, direct, and a "almost square format" of the women figures to "increase the brutal directness of <https://assignbuster.com/black-african-race-through-picassos-primitivism-modern-painting-les-demoiselles-davignon/>

the Africanized style.”[14]“ The demoiselles’ bodies are [also] doubly branded as sexual, for historically, the exotic – or, more specifically, the African and the so-called Oriental woman” which signifies their significant differences from the ideal European imagination.[15]For example, the *Venus Anadyomene* by Ingres, 1848, is the painting that held the key aspect of European art expectation; it was known as the “ classical” nude and was completed with immense details and realism. The techniques used for Ingres’s painting *Venus Anadyomene* differs greatly from Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* because the different artistic style it introduced, different art techniques such as the use of realism or cubism, and the different visual messages that they represented. Through Picasso’s painting, the representation of African eroticism creates a disgusted appeal to the European viewers due to its cubistic forms, non-realistic, and awkwardly drawn faces. Whereas, Ingres’s simply revealed the realistic, traditional, and classical nude of a beautiful, erotic, and sexually appealing woman who is pleasing to the eyes of the white European viewers.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, it is clear that the opinions and views from the West toward the East is clearly represented in Picasso’s painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* . The appearance of the cubistic naked female figures revealed African art styles that was later adapted into the painting. And the appearance of two naked women on the right-hand side wearing African masks showed their altered identity that can symbolize the decivilizing threat which the Europeans faced from the Eastern race. Also, from the criticisms that it had received through the cubistic and non-idealistic style, <https://assignbuster.com/black-african-race-through-picassos-primitivism-modern-painting-les-demoiselles-davignon/>

Picasso's painting had reflected on the society's racism, stereotype, and prejudice toward the black African race.

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[1]Simon Gikandi, " Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference." *Modernism/modernity* , vol 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 457. doi: 10.1353/mod. 2003. 0062

[2]James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* . (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 197.

[3]James F. Knapp " Primitivism and the Modern." *Boundary 2* 15, no. 1/2 (1986): 367. doi: 10. 2307/303444.

[4]James F. Knapp " Primitivism and the Modern," 368.

[5]Christopher Green. *Picasso's Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* . Masterpieces of Western Painting. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 132.

[6]Anna C. Chave. " New Encounters with Les Demoiselles D'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism." *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (1994): 605. doi: 10. 2307/3046058.

[7]Michelle Wallace, " Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. R. Ferguson et al., Cambridge, Mass., 1990, 48.

[8]Simon Gikandi, " Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 456.

[9]James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 200 .

[10]Christopher Green. *Picasso's Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*, 130 .

[11]Anna C. Chave. " New Encounters with Les Demoiselles D'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," 606.

[12]Anna C. Chave " New Encounters with Les Demoiselles D'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," 606.

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[14]Christopher Green. *Picasso's Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*, 7.

[15]Anna C. Chave " New Encounters with Les Demoiselles D'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," 600.