

Traditional african aesthetics: a philosophical perspective



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There is a distinct contrast between the appreciation of art in African culture and in Western society; the Western concern with the conservation, preservation and appreciation of art within a home, museum or gallery setting, compared to the African sub-cultural concept of its relative use in everyday life. This is perhaps the primary reasons that many object of African art were placed within the categories of artefacts, handicrafts, folk or primitive art. The appreciation of African art, its conception, and execution within the native culture allows for the artist to be recognized for his/her relative importance; even though he or she may remain anonymous, the objects that have been designed become valuable as a reflection of the culture from which they are derived. The respect and value is held within the locality, which helps to explain why the majority of this work suffered such colonial degradation; 'art' as we know it to be, did not exist in African culture, allowing Western collectors to, quite simply, pillage objet d'art' at will.

Despite featuring in private collections from as early as the 15th century, it was not until the early 1900s that the aesthetics of traditional African sculpture became truly credited as a powerful influence among European artists, helping to form an avant-garde in the development of modern art. Spearheaded in France by School of France colleagues Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, who blended brush styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Cezanne and Gauguin with the stylized vision of the human figure shown in African sculpture. The resulting pictorial uniformity, vibrant colour palette, and fragmented Cubist shape helped to define the early modernist period, adapting such qualities to their own efforts and moving beyond the

naturalism that had defined Western art since the Renaissance. These avant-garde artists, their dealers, and leading critics of the era were among the first Europeans to collect African sculptures for their aesthetic value. Starting in the 1870s, thousands of African sculptures arrived in Europe in the aftermath of colonial conquest and exploratory expeditions. They were placed on view in museums such as the Muse d'Ethnographie du Trocadro in Paris, and its counterparts in cities including Berlin, Munich, and London.

At the time, these objects were treated as artifacts of colonized cultures rather than as artworks, and held so little economic value that they were displayed in pawnshop windows and flea markets. While artworks from Australasia and the Americas also drew attention, especially during the 1930s Surrealist movement, the interest in non-Western art by many of the most influential early modernists and their followers centred on the sculpture of sub-Saharan Africa. For much of the twentieth century, this interest was often described as Primitivism, a term denoting a perspective on non-Western cultures that is now seen as problematic. Though the composite spiritual character of these sculptural pieces was instantly recognized by those who cared to notice, little was known of their original meaning and function in West and Central African culture. Focus was instead directed towards their form; modernists admired the sophisticated approach to the abstraction of human figure, shown for example in the Fang reliquary pictured right. The Fang reliquary head in particular exemplified the integration of form with function that had created a centuries-old tradition of abstraction in African art before the European colonial period – and its formal

features powerfully influences modernist artists that had began collecting non-Western art during the early twentieth century.

Fixed upon a bark vessel, the most important individuals of an extended family would be preserved here; hence the sculptural element can be considered the embodiment of the ancestral spirit. Therefore, the representational style is abstract rather than naturalistic; the balanced form in the figures signifies the qualities that the Fang admired in people - tranquillity, vitality and sense of virtuous balance. This is shown through the juxtaposition of straight lines (the neck, hair) and sinuous curved facial features, alongside the symmetrical nature of the piece. This and other Fang sculpted heads held provenance in London at the time, this piece specifically featuring in the collection of Vorticist associate and long-time friend of Picasso and Matisse, Sir Jacob Epstein - it is unsurprising therefore to find many of the Fang stylistic features present in his work. Taking the Female Figure in Flenite (1913) as a key example that follows African rather than European sculptural conventions - Epstein acknowledges the 'primitive' free sexuality and creativity displayed in the Egyptian, Assyrian and African art that he collected, to which he expresses here through the pregnant female form. The large head, short limbs and symmetrical pose are also congruent with African aesthetics, and alluding to the aforementioned Fang head, once again there is a stark contrast between the lithe curvatures and the strict rigid straight lines.

It is arguable that even the choice of material is seeking to reflect the deep dark tone that most African sculpture uses; the Fang head attained this through repeated application of palm oil to the wood over many years, but it <https://assignbuster.com/traditional-african-aesthetics-a-philosophical-perspective/>

seems for better sustainability, Epstein chose a material called Serpentine, which he dubbed 'Flenite' in reference to the flinty hardness of the stone. To a lesser extent, these points are also applicable to Epstein's Rock Drill. The artists of the Gabonese Ambete clans showed a similar approach to the abstraction of the humanist figure, though with more of a focus on movement. Picture below right is another Reliquary piece, this time taking the form of a standing figure with a hollowed torso accessible through the removal of a back panel. Notably striking for its juxtaposition of active and still attitudes, it is the exaggerated flatness of the face, and the lack of general affect that typify elements of African aesthetics that were frequently evoked in modernist paintings and sculpture. Colour is also key here - outwardly appearing as general terracotta and clay tones, the combination of red, black and white holds a huge amount of symbolic relevance, and most importantly, abstraction.

Keep in mind, this piece is a receptacle for ancestral relics and remains. Red here is representative of life force, black of death and mourning, and white of social order and unimpeded perception; the use of all three colours allude to the work's status as an abstract portrait of distant ancestors, more so by where on the body they appear. Returning to the juxtaposing activity and lack of motion - notice the legs and feet feature shades of both black and red, life intertwines death essentially. The central figure and cupped hands in white could be read as denoting the living memory of the ancestor, the arms and hands being their actions, the chest and torso being their soul and strength, and the sexual organs their offspring.

The head however, features all three colours, for what can be perceived as a number of reasons, assuming the spiritual importance of the face in African cultures. Perhaps the black border of the face alludes to the encasement of the central life force (the red face), and the white of the forehead being of unbreakable mind. However, due to the aforementioned lack of knowledge or (in most cases) interest in the symbolic or active functions of any of these artefacts, it is the facial form in this case that can be noted as an influence to a number of key modernist works - most noticeable in a number of Matisse and Picasso's works. Matisse, a seasoned museum browser, had likely encountered African sculptures at the Trocadro museum with fellow Fauve painter Maurice de Vlaminck, before embarking on a spring 1906 trip to North Africa. Upon his return, Matisse painted two version of The Young Sailor (pictured right). In the second version of the painting (below), a more rigidly abstract visage was used, reminiscent of a mask, compared to the first versions naturalistic contoured facial features.

Much like the Ambete piece - here the face is flattened, and more noticeably, there is a major contrast between the still quality of the sailor's face, and the wild, frenetic brushstrokes of his clothing. Whereas the eyebrows, nose and lips are all painted with concrete, heavy lines, his pants and sweater are composed of wild painted curves and turns; a move, in short, from the figurative humanist to the abstract and strategic. At about the same time, Picasso completed his portrait of American expatriate write Gertrude Stein, finalizing her face after ninety repaintings in the frozen, masklike style of archaic sculptural busts from his native Iberia. In the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1913), Stein wrote an account of Matisse's

fall 1906 purchase of a small African sculpture, now identified as a Vili figure from the Democratic Republic of Congo, at a curio shop on his way to visit her home. She recalled that since Picasso was present, Matisse showed it to him.

Picasso later told writers and curators of the pivotal visits he subsequently made to African collections at the Trocadro, beginning in June 1907. He famously described them revulsively, as being dimly lit, musty galleries – but also noted his inability to turn away from his study of the objects' inventive and elegant figural composition. The African sculptures, he said, had helped him to understand his purpose as a painter; not to entertain with decorative images, but to meditate between perceived reality and the creative human mind. To be 'exorcised' from fear of the unknown but giving form to it. Similarly inspired by Gauguin's posthumous retrospective exhibitions and the savage power evoked by paintings such as *The Moon and the Earth* (1893) that had helped throw forth the widespread interest in what was dubbed 'Primitivism' – Picasso followed previous successes with paintings of oversized nude women, and monumental sculptural figures in the autumn of 1906.

In 1907, after hundreds of preparatory sketches, Picasso completed the seminal *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, the painting to whose masklike faces and faceted female forms (alongside the geocentricism of Cezanne's later work) some attribute the birth of Cubism and a defining role in the course of modern art throughout the twentieth century.