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Course

Date

The Influence of African Art on European and American Art from the 19th Century

In the 19th century, the aesthetics of African sculptures had a powerful influence on European and American artists. As such, these traditional African artworks had an essential role in regards to modern art development. In Europe, particularly France, some of the artists who infused African designs derived from sculptures in their works included Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Both of them combined their painting styles with the highly accurate treatment of the human forms that formed the basis of African art (Lewis 34). The result were artworks that consisted of fragmented Cubist shapes, pictorial flatness, and clear color palettes. It is important to note that most of these artists lacked an understanding of the role that African sculptures played in their community. However, from the delicate nature of the various human forms, they were able to realize the spirituality within the art, and it influenced them to extend their works from the theme of naturalism that had dominated Western Art from the Renaissance period.

In Germany, artists who were part of the Die Brücke Group, such as Ernst Ludwig, were also influenced by African art. Ludwig combined the aesthetics visible in African art to the emotional complexity of varied tones of color and distortion of figures to show anxieties that people encountered in the course of their lives. In Munich, Blaue Reiter and Paul Klee were influenced by African artworks in their development of transcendent symbolic imagery. One factor that led to increased interest in European artists in non-Western artworks was the Gauguin

Exhibition that was held in Dresden in the beginning of 20th century. This platform showcased works from various African communities and changed the perception of Western artists.

Most of these artists were attracted to the unique form of art presented by artworks from Africa, and many of them established their collections based on the aesthetic value. Previous colonial activity in Africa had also led to the shipment of African art and placement in various European museums such as Musee d'Ethnographie du Trocadero in France. Initially, these pieces had little value since they were only used to show the conquests of the colonialists. Over time, attention shifted to artworks derived from African, an interest that was referred to as Primitivism. This was initially used as a reference to increased interest by European artists to works that were from non-Western cultures.

The main factor that drew modernists artists to the various African sculptures was their depiction of the human figure. Examples of these included the Fang reliquary ensemble and the reliquary that was sculptured by an Ambete artist.



Picture 1. The Fang Reliquary Ensemble (Source: www.metmuseum.org).

This is a wooden sculpture found among the Fang People of Gabon. Within the community, such sculptures were representations of their ancestors and were addressed when the

people were in need. Although made of wood, the head was enlivened with palm oil which acted as a preservative and enhanced the light play on its surface. One of the pull factors of this piece was the use of equilibrated curved lines by the sculptor. As such, the breadth of the domed forehead does not overshadow the eroded and narrow chin. The piece consists of such vertical extensions which are further enlivened and broadened at various intervals by distinct features such as the two cylindrical rolls and inverted C-shaped ears.

One of the artists whose works were heavily influenced by the Fang sculpture included Jacob Epstein. Despite the difference in culture, several attributes unified both the European and African artists in their artwork. The piece highlights the integration of the function with form, which was the basis of most artworks in African before the colonial era (Marter 465). The sculptural element depicts the embodiment of ancestral spirits in the works. As such, the graphic style is considered to be abstract.

Several other artists encountered artwork from Africa, resulting in a change in their individual pieces. Some of these include Matisse, who came across sculptures in Paris museums and Maurice de Vlaminck, whose travels to North Africa had a lifelong influence on him. After spending an entire summer captivated by African sculptures, Matisse painted two copies of a new painting, *The Young Sailor*. The first version included facial features that were naturalistically contoured. However, in the second version, these figures were replaced with rigid and abstract images similar to a mask. This depiction can be attributed to the African sculptures he had encountered in the course of the summer (Spring 234). Within the same period, Picasso put finishing touches on his painting of Gertrude Stein. A distinct feature of the piece was the face that was depicted in the masklike style familiar with archaic sculptural busts from Africa. Picasso was first shown a sculpture from Africa by Matisse and this experience had a profound

impact on him. Subsequently, he made several trips to African collections in museum galleries to familiarize himself with the art. Picasso found himself deeply intrigued by the elegant figural dispositions and objects' inventive.

According to him, the painting was crucial in helping him realize his primary purpose as an artist. While many artists of the time focused on developing captivating and compelling images, Picasso decided to use his skill to connect the creativity of the mind and perceived reality. As such, he decided to develop pieces gave form to the unknown; hence, people freed themselves from such fears. The result of his new artistic form was the painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. The painting consisted of masklike faces and faceted female bodies, which formed the foundation for cubism and greatly influenced the direction taken by modern art (Willet, 2008). Picasso was pleased with the result and included the use of mask-like figures and sculptures in his other paintings such as *Woman's Head* and *Woman in an Armchair*.

The sculptor and painter Amedeo Modigliani were also influenced by artworks from Africa, particularly from Baule. Most figures and masks from this region consisted of elongated faces and this captivated Amedeo. After making tens of sketches of these elongated faces which included a narrow chin, Amedeo adopted this style in some of his works. The first was his sculptor in 1912 *Woman's Head*. The second was his painting *Reclining Nude*, in 1917 (Marter, 476). His friend, Constantin Brancusi was also influenced by African art, mainly because it was carved from wood, like pieces from his home country, Romania. Unlike his teacher, Rodin, who used bronze in his artwork, Brancusi preferred wood as he was directly involved in the creation throughout the process.

American artists were also influenced by the growing fascination towards African art. An example is Max Weber, who traveled to Paris to learn more about painting under Matisse.

During his visit, he managed to view the African art collection owned by Picasso. Upon his return, he documented the impact the pieces had on him and incorporated them in his artwork. As such, subsequent works by Weber included mask figurines that were rendered in the abstract style. A Picasso art exhibition in 1914 by Alfred Stieglitz in the United States was the first to showcase African sculpture publicly as an acceptable art form in the country (Spring 85).

Throughout Germany, many artists wanted to depict the interwar situation in their country, and this could not be achieved by using naturalism. Naturalism made it difficult to represent the dislocation and anxiety of the German people during war times. This led to the rise of artists such as Paul Klee whose unique abstract style of the painting contains a close resemblance to masks originating from the Bwa culture in Burkina Faso. In 1931, George Grosz also painted Berlin Street, which clearly shows various melancholy figures similar to those depicted in African sculptures (Willet, 2008). This influence was spread to his students since he moved to New York and became a teacher at the Art Students League.

In conclusion, African art that had previously been ignored has had a tremendous impact on European and American art starting from the 19th century to the present times. Having encountered sculptures from Africa, artists of the time such as Matisse and Picasso agreed that these pieces were not only useful for aesthetic purposes but were closely linked to nature. As a result, they incorporated features of these pieces in their works, leading to the development of the abstract form of artwork and bringing to an end the era of naturalism.

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