

Excerpted from Ferrier, ed., *Art of Our Century*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1989, 73.

## 1906: AFRICAN ART CASTS A SPELL ON ARTISTS

PARIS A new passion has conquered the world of the young artists who are always ready to admire primitive values. The passion is African art. It is almost everywhere in Paris—in the museum at the Trocadero, where Dr. Hamy assembles large collections, in the Vieux Rouet, and in Father Heymann's store, the main supplier, which collectors have nicknamed "the slave trade on the Rue de Rennes." The doors of studios are open to receive statuettes, masks, and fetishes, which the painters and sculptors treat like idols and show to one another secretly. They see in African art the beginning of an answer to their own questions.

Who started this fad? Vlaminck asserts that he was the first to receive the revelation of African statuary. But it was Paul Gauguin, who was captivated by Oceanian art, who paved the way, as is demonstrated by the retrospective of his work at the current Salon d'Automne. In one moment he assimilated everything that modern creators can take from their far-away inspiration. It is said that Derain became convinced of the importance of primitive art when he saw the Gauguin collection; he is in love with African art.

Matisse discovers African sculpture with his friends Vlaminck and Derain. It has a more profound effect on the leader of the Fauves than on his two friends. In several of Matisse's recent works the religious tradition of African art and its purity of line respond to the development of his formal search.



GREBO MASK.  
Paris. Musée Picasso

On the other hand, Picasso is sensitive to the supernatural in these statuettes. Initially, they seem to him to be just "fetishes." It is said that he fell under their spell one evening when he was invited, with Matisse, to Gertrude Stein's for dinner at the Rue de Fleurus. Matisse brought along a small statue that had particularly struck him that afternoon in Heymann's store. Picasso did not take his eyes off it all evening. The next day, the poet Andre Salmon visited him at the Bateau-Lavoir and saw several drawings on the floor that he had made during the night—they were based on the model of the statue that had fascinated him so.

**The final extensions of Impressionism—Post-impersonism, Cézanne—have demonstrated the desire of avant-garde artists to go further in the search for artistic renewal.** With the entrance on the scene of African art, a break seems to have occurred that would take them even further away from the traditional art of the past.

Excerpted from Strickland, *The Annotated Mona Lisa*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992, 22-23.

### African Art: The First Cubists

The main artistic products of tropical Africa were wood carvings, both masks and sculpture in the round. In form these objects were angular, off-balance, and distorted. For members of African society, they were sacred objects harboring the life force of an ancestor or nature spirit and had power to cure illnesses or harm enemies. On special occasions the figures and masks were removed from their shrines, washed, anointed with palm oil, and decorated with beads and cloth. In between rituals, the figures

were considered so infused with supernatural power they were hidden, and women and children were forbidden to look at them. Although the moist jungle climate rotted many of these wooden objects, those that remain express the emotional intensity their society invested in them.



**UKagleu (mask),**  
(c.1775-1825)  
Dan, Rietberg  
Museum, Zurich.  
*African masks  
were typically  
lozenge-shaped,  
with wedge noses  
and almond like  
eyes.*

**MASKS.** Wooden masks were used in ritual performances with complex musical rhythms, dances, and costumes. For their full impact, they should be thought of in motion, surrounded by colorful garments and the rapid swaying and rustling of raffia skirts and arm fringes.

Masks were intentionally unrealistic: when confronting a supernatural power, the idea was for the performer to conceal his true identity behind this artificial face. For dramatic effect, carvers simplified human features in a series of sharply cut advancing and receding planes.

This freedom from European tradition is what appealed to Pablo Picasso—who became aware of African art around 1905—and inspired the Cubist movement. Picasso described his reaction to African fetish masks this way: "It came to me that this was very important. ...These masks were not just pieces of sculpture like the rest. ...They were magic. "

Their influence is evident in Picasso's landmark painting, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)" (Avignon was the name of a street in Barcelona's red-light district, and the women were intended to depict prostitutes.) The painting was a transition point between Picasso's African-influenced period and pure Cubism. Inspired by the distortions of African carving and in order to show multiple aspects of an object at the same time, Picasso painted the figures in jagged planes.

**Picasso, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)," 1907, MOMA, NY** After seeing African masks, Picasso raced back to his studio to repaint the faces in this picture.



**AFRICAN SCULPTURE.** African carvers consistently rejected real-life appearance in favor of vertical forms, tubular shapes, and stretched-out body parts derived from the cylindrical form of trees. Since sculptures were believed to house powerful spirits, these wooden figures could wreak havoc or bestow blessings among the living.



**Dogon Primordial  
Couple, Dogon, Mali,**  
Barnes Foundation,  
Philadelphia

## THE FAR-FLUNG INFLUENCE OF TRIBAL ART

Beginning with Gauguin's pace-setting appreciation of South Sea islanders, primitive art influenced professional Western artists from the late nineteenth century through the present. The following artists and movements were the most affected by the art of pre-industrial societies:

**GAUGUIN:** Gauguin went to Tahiti in 1891, seeking an exotic culture unspoiled by civilization. The brilliant colors and simplified anatomy of his island paintings reflect decorative Oceanic art.

**FAUVES:** Around 1904-8, the Fauves discovered African and South Pacific sculpture. Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck were key painters who enthusiastically collected African masks.

**CUBISTS:** Picasso and Braque pioneered this movement based on African tribal sculpture and masks, which fractured reality into overlapping planes. Cubism stimulated developments throughout Europe, leading to the abstraction of Malevich and Mondrian.

**SURREALISTS:** In the 1920s, antirational artists like Ernst, Miró, Magritte, Giacometti,

and Dali collected Pacific carvings, African masks, and fanciful Eskimo masks.

**MEXICAN MURALISTS:** Jose Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera dominated Mexican art in the 1930s by paying homage to the Mayan and Aztec empires.

**MODERNISTS:** Sophisticated artists like Modigliani found a freshness and vitality in tribal art missing in conventional art. His paintings of long-necked women resemble African carved figures.

**ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS:** The impermanence of Navaho sand paintings, destroyed at the end of a rite, influenced Abstract Expressionists to focus on the process of artistic creation rather than the end product.

**CONTEMPORARY.** Artists as diverse as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring, and David Solle have incorporated images of African masks into their work.

**Giacometti, "Walking Woman,"** 1932-33, collection of Rhode-St.-Genese. *Another Modernist whose work resembles tribal African art is Giacometti, known for his elongated sculptures.*



Excerpted from Honour and Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995, 720-721.

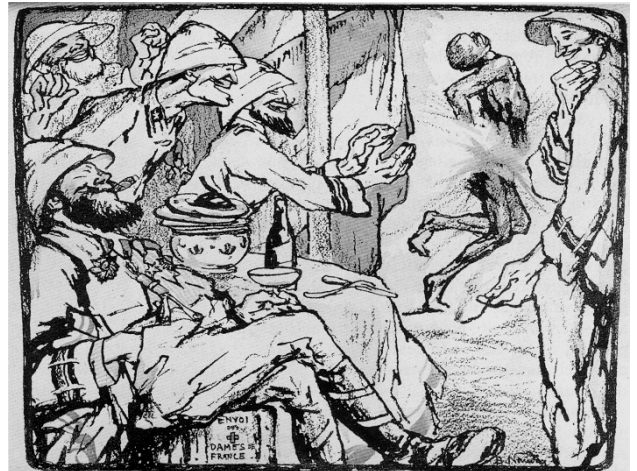
## In Context: Picasso's *Demoiselles*

### ANARCHISM, COLONIALISM AND ART AS EXORCISM

#### LA FETE DU 14 JUILLET A BRAZZAVILLE

Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (19,2) did more than open up new approaches to form and space in painting. It had further meanings both for the artist and for his friends in Paris, who were the only people to see it for many years. Various influences had been absorbed into the painting during its long period of gestation — diverse influences such as Iberian sculpture, late Cezanne figure painting and even El Greco, whose *Vision of St John the Divine* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) provided a source, in reverse, for the three left-hand demoiselles, but African art was the final and determining catalyst. It impelled Picasso on a breakneck course when he 'discovered' it after he had begun the painting. African sculpture's overwhelming appeal was two-fold. It held out a key towards solving Picasso's dual problem: how to radicalize structure and form without losing important issues of content and allusions to real-life concerns.

African art could be seen in Paris from at least as early as the 1890s not only in the Ethnographical Museum but in junkshops where 'fetishes' from the French colonies were often on sale. Picasso and his painter friends Vlaminck, Derain and others, who were soon to discover African art, must have been quite familiar with it for some years though without, apparently, being more than mildly interested until current events in France brought the whole subject of Africa up, and in a very pointed way. A French colonial scandal hit the headlines in 1904-5. Arbitrary executions and murders by two French colonial officials, Gaud and Toque, were made known and widely publicized, notably in the illustrated weekly *L'Assiette au beurre*, to which Picasso's painter friends Juan Gris and Frank Kupka—both to become prominent Cubist painters later—frequently contributed. A special issue on *The Torture of Blacks* came out in March 1905. The most shocking instances were



**19,5** Bernard Naudin, 'La Fete du 14 Juillet a Brazzaville' cartoon from *L'Assiette du beurre*, 11 March 1905.



those of the so-called 'hunts' and the 14 July festivities in the French Congo. One of the 'hunts' was illustrated, the white hunters in their Safari suits and topee hats rising from their camp-stools to take aim as a covey of naked Africans was driven past them by, presumably, French army 'beaters'. In the same issue Bastille Day, of all days—the day when the beginning of the French Revolution is celebrated allover France—was illustrated with a lithograph of the festivities at Brazzaville, the capital of the French Congo (19,5). French colonial officials are here shown applauding and jeering at the spectacle of an African being dynamited to make a human firecracker.



19,6 Gelett Burgess, *Picasso in his Bateau- Lavoir studio*, 1908. Photograph. Musee Picasso. Paris.

The Gaud-Toque scandal was eventually hushed up but there were fierce debates in the Chamber of Deputies and a widespread sense of public outrage. Anti-colonial societies were promoted and remained active until 1910 or later. At one of their meetings Pierre Quillard, whom Picasso knew, made a remarkable speech in which he never condescended or pitied the Africans but asked his 'brothers of another skin and another color to please forgive us for the crimes we have committed against them'. Quillard, like several of Picasso's friends, was a declared anarchist and although Picasso does not seem to have ever committed himself, at any rate politically, he was as open to the appeal of anarchism as they were. For it was the anarchist cultivation of independence of mind, freedom of action and experience for its own sake that attracted artists and intellectuals. The great interest suddenly taken by Picasso and his anarchist friends in the 'dark continent' and African art was motivated in this way: it was a radical avant-garde gesture, a provocative and not simply an appreciative, still less an aesthetic, response.

Picasso's intimate involvement is illustrated by a photograph of him in 1908 in his Paris studio taken by an American writer, Gelett Burgess, who published it in 1910 in an article entitled 'The Wild Men of Paris'. For this Picasso posed himself surrounded by his African and Oceanic sculptures (19,6). The previous year he had painted a wilder

and even more provocative work than the *Demoiselles*, a small painting he entitled *Mother and Child* quite clearly based on a traditional Madonna and Child composition, complete with halo and the blue robe of heaven that the Madonna traditionally wears (19,7). The transformation of such an easily and immediately recognizable white man's holy icon through what would have been thought in 1907 a crude and brutalizing African manner of painting, evoking associations of tribal magic, superstition, irrationality, darkness and horror, was an unmistakably anarchic gesture. It exploited a familiar anarchic strategy of inversion to equalize and level the 'savage' with the 'civilized'.

Picasso was never very forthcoming about African art and what it had meant to him. But in 1937 he gave to the writer Andre Malraux an unusually candid account of his first visit to the Ethnographical Museum some 30 years previously. Every detail was imprinted on his memory as if it had happened the previous day. 'I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed, I understood that it was very important,' he told Malraux. 'The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things.... They were against everything—against unknown, threatening spirits. I always looked at fetishes. I understood; I too am against everything.... Spirits, the unconscious (people still weren't talking about that very much), emotion—they're all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty mannikins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism—painting—yes absolutely!'



19,7 Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child*, 1907. Canvas, 317/8 x 235/8ins (81 x 60cm). Musee Picasso, Paris.

