

The African Influence on Picasso's Art

Since the 15th century, and at a time when capitalism was on the rise, European painting and sculpture largely focused on achieving a naturalistic representation of the physical world, one in which there would be an accurate (or near-accurate) depiction of things, people, scenes and an environment dominated by material wealth.

Changes in the direction of European art, also considered the beginning of modern art, are thought to have been prompted by Pablo Picasso's visit to the Musee d'Ethnographie (Ethnographic Museum) in the Palais du Trocadero, Paris in 1907. Born in Malaga, Spain on October 25, 1881, Picasso, arguably the most renowned artist of the 20th century, eventually lived and died in Paris, France on April 8, 1973. Some of the African artifacts that Europeans brought back from the continent during the colonization period were displayed at the Musee d'Ethnographie. Virtually unknown and largely described as *tribal* or *primitive*, these African works of art were being witnessed for the first time by visitors to the museum.

The artifacts he saw at the Musee d'Ethnographie greatly influenced Picasso and his coworkers – such as Georges Braque (French painter and sculptor) – who subsequently founded the avant-garde and profoundly influential movement of Cubism in the latter part of 1907. Like other cubists who sought to improve reality through the creation of new, tasteful objects and abstract, geometric structures, Picasso's successive works displayed considerable indebtedness to the formal simplification and expressive power of African carvings. His characters began to reflect oddly shaped faces that resembled African masks and sculpture; his increased reliance on earth tones was also emblematic of African sculpture and he more frequently illustrated wild animals that were



Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)* (1907)

Source: "Pablo Picasso Cubism." Pablo Picasso Paintings. 1997-2011. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

typically found in the African range, such as bulls and other horned creatures. This is in addition to his representations of African characters typically made of wood and other materials, which further revealed his curiosity and fascination with African sculpture.

One of Picasso's most famous and groundbreaking cubist paintings, which is also associated with the launch of modernist art, is the extraordinary *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907). Depicting five female prostitutes in a Spanish brothel, this piece incorporates many facets of African sculpture and art, particularly the ceremonial masks of the Dogon ethnic group of Mali. With arms raised above their heads, the almost violently twisted and seductive figures are composed of flat, splintered planes. The two figures on the right of the picture bear masks that are evidently culled from African culture.

Other works by Picasso, such as *Negro Dancer* (1937), also depict elements of African art. In this work in which a dancer is masked, the artist again relies on the African mask motif. His *Female Nude* [*The Dancer of Avignon*] (1907), *Man with Mandolin* (1911), *Man with Guitar* (1911), *Head of a Woman* (1909) and *L'Amitie* (1908) also signify Picasso's interest in African sculptural techniques.

Picasso was not the only prominent European artist to be inspired by African masks, sculpture and other art forms. Others include:

- Leading post-Impressionist French painter, Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin
- Dutch painter, Meyer de Haan
- German painter and printmaker, Emil Nolde
- German painter and printmaker, Franz Marc
- Romanian modernist sculptor, Constantin Brancusi
- French draftsman, printmaker and sculptor, Henri Matisse
- Swiss sculptor, painter, draftsman and printmaker, Alberto Giacometti
- Italian sculptor and painter, Amedeo Modigliani.



Pablo Picasso's *Negro Dancer* (1937)

Source: Crafts in India. N.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.



Pablo Picasso's *Female Nude [The Dancer of Avignon]* (1907)

Source: Pablo Picasso Paintings. 1997-2011. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

Some scholars maintain that Picasso initially denied the influence of African art on his cubist style, but that he would eventually recant his stand and admit that African art had a major impact on the techniques he adopted from the early 20th century. Whatever the truth is, in African art Picasso found a new way of perceiving and representing the world; it was a profound artistic concept that broke with the dominant European art tradition. The African sculptures, statues and masks that inspired him were not products of the capitalist society that Picasso was familiar with; they belonged to a pre-capitalist setting where the role of art was quite different and served various utilitarian, traditional and religious roles. Such art was not designed for display in palaces or museums, or to imitate status and material possession; rather, it was useful in everyday life as an expression of forces that range from the spiritual to the emotional. For Picasso, this creative paradigm was the perfect tool for rebellion against bourgeois and aristocratic art. It helped him and other European artists to escape the constraints of Realism and move into Cubism, Surrealism, and Dadaism.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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