

# Canons and Counter Canons in the Battles about Global Art

Kaija Kaitavuori

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The Cubists' fascination with African and Oceanic art and its revolutionary influence on Western art in the early 1900s is an important stage in the development of modern art. Meanwhile in Africa, in what is now Nigeria, there was a reciprocal interest in Western figurative art, which eventually led to the establishment of academic art education in West Africa. This second story, however, is much less known and, when it is told, the adoption of Western influences has generally been seen as passive and even damaging.

Now that these 'othered' voices are claiming attention and bringing their views to the art historical debate, Western and non-Western art narratives need to be retold from new perspectives. This article examines two moments, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the West has enhanced its artistic production by leaning on influences from elsewhere while maintaining the right to grant or deny the status of art for cultural objects to itself. The article calls into question Western practices in categorising products of visual expression and highlights the contractual nature of art historical classifications and canons.

Keywords: *canon, art history, Global South, Modernism, Picasso, Africa*

## Regarding canons

Globalisation of art and the art field has been constitutive of contemporary art, to the point that contemporary art has been equated with global art.<sup>1</sup> The development has also deeply affected the discipline of History of Art and challenged many traditional art historical concepts and tools such as periodisation, influence, or canon.

The working definition of ‘canon’ for this study is the simplified idea of a canon as a body of knowledge that we are assumed to hold. Lists of must-know items are always specific to a context, with the content and the criteria for the canon varying accordingly. In discussions about national canons of literature, for example, the idea is to create a list of authors and works that all citizens should read or at least be aware of. For art historians, there are professional canons of artists and artworks that a scholar is expected to know in order to be taken seriously in the field. Claudia Mattos puts the matter succinctly: “What holds the field together is precisely the common canon, theories, and methods.”<sup>2</sup> James Elkins, in his essay reflecting on whether art history can be global, considers a common canon as an argument in favour of a single unified discipline (as opposed to fragmentation of the discipline across the globe).<sup>3</sup>

But what is this shared knowledge in general, and in particular with regard to modern and contemporary art, and can it be defined globally? This article is structured around two moments,

1 Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Estimate,” in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting & Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

2 Claudia Mattos, “Wither Art History? Geography, Art Theory and New Perspectives for an Inclusive Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 96, no. 3 (2014): 259, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43188880>.

3 James Elkins, “Introduction: Art History as a Global Discipline,” in *Is Art History Global?* Ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 16–18.

one at the beginning and the other at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both including a stock story and a counter story – an official narrative that we can call the canon, and its hidden counterpart. The stories sketch out the relationships between Europe and the African continent.

The article is not based on first-hand research and therefore does not seek to contribute to the debate on the development of modern or post-modern art, although it does use these debates as material. Nor does it discuss the content, meaning or significance of the works of the artists mentioned, or as such analyse the exhibitions discussed. Hence, the text does not contain new research on the artists or exhibitions in question but is based on second-hand material. The focus is on art history writing and how some things have filtered into the established body of knowledge while others have been left outside it, and how the professional field has been woken up to the situation and to the demands for change over the last couple of decades. An art historian trained in the 1980s, like the author of this text, has not only to supplement what she has been taught but also to restructure her perceptions. The article seeks to reassess the choices on which canonised art history is based and to question the foundations of these selections.

## Picasso vs Onabolu

It is well-known that Picasso (1881–1973) and his colleagues – Derain, Brancusi, Modigliani, Matisse, Ernst... – were astonished and inspired by the objects from Africa and Oceania that they saw in Musée de l’homme at the Palais Trocadéro in Paris in 1907. The formal language and strong expressive power of the masks and other items spoke to the artists who, at the time, were struggling to break away from the conventions of academic fine arts and the centuries long tradition of mimesis and representation. It has been debated whether this encounter with a totally different form of expression was the main impetus for the artists to set off on new paths in

art, or whether it was just the final push on an already well laid-out course.<sup>4</sup>

Either way, without hesitation the artists adopted the visual features and integrated them into their own art. The breakthrough work was Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, the first painting showing the direct influence of African masks. Several matching exercises have been made to find and compare the original items with the creation of the artist.<sup>5</sup> *Demaiselles* and the subsequent works changed the development of western art. The painting and its maker have unquestionably become part of the canon of Modern Art.<sup>6</sup>

While Picasso and his friends were examining the tribal art in Paris, in one of the African lands colonized by the British, Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) was intrigued by the visual culture of the colonial masters. He saw reproductions of European art in magazines and books, and started exercising his own hand in the white man's style. He learned to master the technique to the point that he continued his studies in Europe to become an artist and a teacher. He studied anatomy, perspective, proportions, colour theory... that is, the whole repertoire of academic fine art.<sup>7</sup> Back in his home country in the 1920s, he introduced art education into schools (the colonial schooling system, geared

to produce clerks for the colonial administration, did not include art in the curriculum). In addition, he convinced the education authorities to invite an artist-teacher from England to teach art students. Onabolu's initiatives were essential in establishing art teaching in Nigeria and the West of Africa. Today, Onabolu is celebrated as the founder of Nigerian modern art.

We know that Picasso felt strongly about the art he discovered and soon surrounded himself with African objects. For him, it was "a form of magic".<sup>8</sup> As to Onabolu, it is thrilling to imagine his wonderment and curiosity in front of Western representational image making as something comparable to the awe felt by the post-impressionists in reaction to the encountering of the strange, foreign images brought from Africa. In parallel, images that looked real were magic to Onabolu: he considered the ability to reproduce the visible world naturalistically as a proof of "wizardry of the white man".<sup>9</sup>

These two developments – both of them to do with the discovery of new pictorial form and expression – happened almost exactly at the same time; the artists were born one year apart. It is just that the second one is much less familiar to us westerners. Picasso is one of the must-to-know artists for art professionals and amateurs alike, while Onabolu is not.

The two cases have also been analysed and valued differently in art history writing. Recent

4 William Rubin ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984); Thomas McEvelley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art' at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984," *Artforum* 23:3 November (1984): 54–60.

5 Rubin, *"Primitivism"*.

6 Picasso is number one in Elkins' list of canonical artists, based on an art history database counting the most studied artists. Elkins, "Introduction," 17.

7 For Aina Onabolu's life and work, see Ola Oloidi, "Growth and Development of Formal Art Education in Nigeria, 1900 – 1960," *Transafrican Journal of History* 15 (1986): 108–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24328610>; Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 39–70.

8 The famous and oft-quoted description of the effect of encountering tribal art reads: "And then I understood what painting really meant. It's not an aesthetic process; it's a form of magic that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires. The day I understood that I had found my path." The source of this quote, however, is almost never mentioned. It is quoted in André Malraux's *Picasso's Mask* from 1976, so dates 70 years after the event and hence cannot be understood as an immediate account of his impression.

9 Oloidi, "Growth and Development," 112, fn. 20.

scholarship on Picasso and modern art has pointed out how the influence of African art on Picasso has in fact been downplayed.<sup>10</sup> Art historians have tended to describe the relationships between African and modern art merely as a source of inspiration rather than direct influence. The leading contribution to this line of interpretation is William Rubin's definition of the similarities as "affinities", a concept that was nailed down in the title of his influential exhibition and its catalogue in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art subtitled *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.<sup>11</sup> Affinity suggests empathy or benevolent liking (from the moderns towards the other) and avoids acknowledging any actual direct influence of African art or that the modern artists would use or adapt its visual features and forms. Rubin, indeed, spares no effort to prove that Picasso could not have seen some of the masks that are connected to *Demoiselles*, in this manner insisting that it was not a question of influence or a direct source. Instead, Picasso "metamorphosed", "extrapolated", "fused the points of departure".<sup>12</sup> Or else, it was a question of "morphological coincidence".<sup>13</sup> Simon Gikandi identifies other similar redefinitions such as "connotations" in Yves-Alain Bois' *Painting as Model* (1990) or "convergences" by art collector Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (as early as in 1948).<sup>14</sup>

This view is of course in line with the emphasis of Western modernism on individualism and autonomous creation. The most serious insult against a modernist genius would be an accusation of copying or that their art is derivative in nature. Therefore, Picasso made clear on several

occasions that for him it was never a question of borrowing or copying, and this attitude was reaffirmed by his chroniclers.<sup>15</sup> According to Gikandi, the aim was "to minimize [--] the constitutive role of Africa in the making of modernism".<sup>16</sup> The role of the 'Other' – the unknown that represents the primitive and magic – in the formation of modernism was identified in the spiritual and psychological power, which worked through the subconscious or unconscious, with no formal or aesthetic influence.<sup>17</sup>

For Onobolu, on the other hand, the project was a conscious emulation of Western easel painting. It was a radical departure from the tradition and, above all, against expectations of what a colonised person should do or would be able to achieve. He set out to prove wrong the assumption that a colonial subject could never learn to make art in the European sense.<sup>18</sup> Art was not included at all in the colonial curriculum, as, from the colonisers point of view, it was deemed not useful for the colonial project nor achievable to Africans.<sup>19</sup> As to its subject matter, Onobolu's paintings showed Africans as individuals, worthy of portrayal, contrary to the long history of the Western view of natives as devoid of human dignity or, at best, useful as work force. Onobolu quickly became popular among the educated local elite in Lagos. He also found a handful of European supporters but mainly the Western art professionals took a negative view of his approach. The European art teachers, including Kenneth Murray, the first one of them to

10 Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3(2003): 455–80, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2003.0062>.

11 Rubin, "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art*.

12 Rubin, "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art*, 260–65, 278.

13 Hal Foster, *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 184.

14 Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 458.

15 Rubin, "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art*, 240–343.

16 Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 458.

17 Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 466; 470–71.

18 Oloidi, "Growth and Development of Formal Art Education in Nigeria," 112; Olu Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," *Third Text*, 16, no. 3 (2002), 243–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820110120704>.

19 Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism", 247–48; Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism*.

be invited on Onobolu's recommendation, saw Western influences as degrading to African art and encouraged their students to turn to their own tradition instead.<sup>20</sup> This view persisted, as will be discussed in the next paragraph, and has lasted to the present day.<sup>21</sup> The two events testify to the asymmetry of the setting and to art historical double standards: whereas African influence on Western art is fruitful (notwithstanding attempts to deny it), Western influences on African art are to be deplored.

## Magiciens vs Négritude

A second instance of non-Western art serving as a catalyst for change in Western art was – again in Paris – the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in 1989. It is regularly described as a landmark exhibition, ground-breaking, paradigm-forming or, indeed, canonical.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition brought together, and showed side-by-side, art from the First and the Third World (as they were called at the time). It became hugely famous and discussed both in celebratory and in critical terms.<sup>23</sup>

The iconic image, almost always reproduced as an illustration of the exhibition, juxtaposes works by British artist Richard Long and Paddy Sims of Yuendumu community in Australia. The

shot illustrates the ethos of showcasing creators from different parts of the world in the same space on equal terms. Similarly, the catalogue allocated equal space for each artist and had an inventive way of using the world map that showed the artist's place of origin as the centre point from which the rest of the map unfolded.<sup>24</sup>

In preparation for the show, the French curators travelled to other continents. What they brought back was not works by artists trained in the art academies, by that time well-established on the African continent, but items that were created for other purposes than the art context: objects made for use or items that belonged to belief systems and their rituals or to other cultural activities in various communities. For example, Ghanaian artist Kane Kwei made coffins shaped like objects connected to the deceased's occupation. Beninese Cyprien Tokoudagba's sculptures were in fact Voodoo shrine figures. Esther Mahlangu from South Africa created in the exhibition a house decorated in the style that she had learned from her maternal relatives as part of her Ndebele heritage.

The curators were fascinated by the creative power that was distinctly different from the modernist tradition. The works resonated with the sensibilities of contemporary artists and spoke to the postmodern quest for new forms and artistic approaches. They also responded to the growing interest in rituals, ceremonies and community-based or participatory processes in Western art, and in general to the turn towards the 'Other' in the 1980s and 90s. The title of the exhibition which designates both the non-Western as well as Western artists as 'magicians' acknowledges this sort of nostalgia for expanding the modernist notions of art and the artist.

20 According to Oguibe, this led to the development of two opposing strands of art education: Onobolu's model of learning technical skills, and the European-led instruction based on craft, folk stories and village life, which contributed to constructing the colonial view of the "authentic native". Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism," 249, 254–56.

21 Chika Okeke-Agulu, "The Challenge of the Modern: An Introduction," *African Arts*, 39, no. 1 (2006), 15.

22 E.g. Cesare Poppi, "African Art and Globalisation: On whose Terms the Question?," *Engage review*, no. 13 (2003).

23 The literature on the exhibition is vast. For contemporary discussion, see e.g. *Third Text*, Special Issue on *Magiciens de la Terre*, no. 6 (1989); or Jean Fisher "Magiciens de la terre," *Artforum* 28, no. 1 (1989). For a retrospective reflection, see Lucy Steeds et al., *Making Art Global: Volume 2: Magiciens de la Terre 1989* (Köln: Walther König, 2013).

24 Jean Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989). Catalogue of the exhibition.

Again, the West recognized its own aspirations in art from elsewhere. New art was ‘discovered’ by the curators and artists and used as a source of artistic enrichment. As with the development of cubism and modernism, we may ask how essential the non-European impulse was for the new directions of western contemporary art, which was already in its process of breaking away from painting and sculpture as privileged media in the direction of installations, ritualistic performance, and participatory production. At least, it is safe to say, contemporary art would not look as it does today without non-Western influences. Since *Magiciens*, art from outside the Euro-American world became more explicitly a source of enrichment for Western art. According to anthropologist Cesare Poppi “*Magiciens de la Terre* [- -] gave public recognition to the set of aesthetic categories which have come to constitute ‘the postmodern canon.’”<sup>25</sup>

As to the former colonies, they had their own ways of dealing with cultural influences and a different attitude to cultural categories. An occasion when various artforms were shown together, under the same umbrella, can be found in Havana biennial, founded in 1984. Its second and third editions particularly (in 1986 and -89) were full-scale global biennials showing contemporary art from all continents – prior to *Magiciens* which claimed to be “The first truly international exhibition of worldwide contemporary art”. The biennial also had an inclusive approach to art forms showing art, craft, design, photography, and amateur art side-by-side as a conscious anti-colonial and anti-capitalist strategy.<sup>26</sup> The strict division between craft and (autonomous) art is a Western categorisation that the “Third world biennial” did not have to respect.

25 Poppi, “African Art and Globalisation”.

26 Gerardo Mosquera, “The Third Bienal de La Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts,” *OnCurating*, no. 46 (2020): 120–126, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-46-reader/the-third-bienal-de-la-habana-in-its-global-and-local-contexts.html>.

An even earlier event was the first *Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* (World Festival of Negro Arts) in Dakar in 1966. Its roots can be found in the Négritude movement, originating in Paris in 1930s and 40s among black students from French-speaking colonies in West Africa and the Caribbean that forged connections between the overseas cultures and the vibrant international arts community in Paris. The young African and Caribbean intellectuals frequented the same circles as the European artists, among them Picasso who became friends with the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor. The movement reclaimed the value of black culture and history, opposing the European, particularly French, colonial culture, and emphasized Africanness and Blackness in their own right, not just in comparison with or as the ‘other’ in relation to whiteness.<sup>27</sup>

They did not, however, advocate for the rejection of the West and its modern culture, philosophy and technology but, on the contrary, for the adoption of the best and most useful parts of it, while holding on to their own African heritage. Loyal to this idea of combining tradition and openness, in 1966 Senghor, then the first president of the independent Senegal, organised the first *Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres*. The show included black artists, musicians, writers, poets and actors from both sides of the Atlantic and comprised a vast programme of events, including exhibitions, conferences and street performances.<sup>28</sup>

As part of the festival’s visual arts programme, the exhibition *L’Art nègre: Sources, evolution*,

27 Reiland Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement: W. E. B. Du Bois, Leon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Franz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

28 The Dakar festival was a start of a series of Pan-African events: *The First Pan-African Cultural Festival* in Algiers in 1969, *Zaire 74* in Kinshasa in 1974, and the second edition of *World Festival of Negro Arts* in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria.

*expansion* was designed to juxtapose African art with modernist artworks and showed tribal and ritual objects for the first time as art. Held at the Musée dynamique, a museum built for the occasion, *L'Art nègre* gathered items from European museums and collections as well as royal treasures in Africa. They were called 'masterpieces' and shown together with works of European modern artists such as Picasso, Modigliani, Braque and Derain.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition drew huge international attention and was later shown at Grand Palais in Paris. Under the umbrella of the festival was also an exhibition of contemporary African art titled *Tendances et confrontations* which included artists from several African countries and African-American artists from the US. Albeit in different locations, the exhibitions were conceived as complements to each other. According to Senghor, "*L'Art nègre* represents the past, *Tendances et confrontations* is conceived to represent art of a new vision of the world".<sup>30</sup> For more than 20 years before *Magiciens* the Festival showed traditional arts together with modern and contemporary art.

Once again, only one of these exhibitions, *Magiciens*, is recognised as ground-breaking and canonical in art history writing while the others, located outside the Western art world have remained in obscurity.

## Categories and (in)validations

Art history has been written from the Western / Global North perspective. Its categorisations maintain a specific idea of what is modern and what comes thereafter whether it's called

postmodern or contemporary. As narrated above, the swings from classical to modern and from modern to postmodern have drawn on contact with the outside: the Third World / Global South. The power to define what these moves entail and how the elements in the interaction are valued, nevertheless, has been withheld in the West. The categories that were born out of these encounters – Modern, Contemporary – have then been projected back onto the global landscape, and what has not seen as fitting into them has been deemed invalid.

Such a dismissal of non-Western modern art took place with *Magiciens*: Academically trained, fully fledged artists from outside Europe were seen as inauthentic and were not included in the exhibition; neither were artists in diasporas in Europe or the USA (exceptions were Brazilian Cildo Meireles and Pakistani-born UK-based Rashid Araeen). Instead, the curators chose to exhibit creative practice that had hitherto been categorised as primitive, folk art, or craft, as this type of creativity spoke to their sense of the new trends in contemporary art. Decisions regarding inclusion and trespassing on category borders were reserved for western curators. They shuffled the earlier classifications – separation of ethnographic objects and works of art as different categories – and elevated functional objects into art.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, and as part of the same process, some of the newly discovered 'magiciens' were launched into the career of a contemporary artist and were happy to find success in that field. For example, Esther Mahlangu now exhibits in contemporary art galleries and is described as one of South Africa's best-known artists.

29 Cédric Vincent, "Tendances and Confrontations: Dakar 1966," *Afterall* no. 43 (2017): 88–101, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/tendances-and-confrontations-dakar-1966/>.

30 « L'Art nègre » représente l'art du passé, « Tendances et confrontations » est conçue représenter l'art d'une nouvelle vision du monde. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *L'Art Nègre. Sources, évolution, expansion*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1966), 60–61.

31 The question of displaying functional and ritualistic objects in Western art institutions was addressed in the exhibition *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* at the Center for African Art, New York in 1988. See Susan Vogel, "Introduction" in the catalogue (New York: Prestel Verlag, 1988), 11–17; also Susan Vogel, *Africa explores: 20th century African art* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1991).

The categories of Western art history were created for describing the development of art in the occident and their explanatory power with regard to art from elsewhere is limited or outright distorted. There is a long history in Western art history scholarship of reading the art of other places and eras on the aesthetic level only, omitting the social and cultural context. Thomas McEvilley gives an account of this tradition in relation to *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* based on visual juxtapositions of anonymous tribal art and modern 'masters'.<sup>32</sup> He describes "(t)he need to coopt difference into one's own dream of order [--] a tribal superstition of Western civilization: the Hegel-based conviction that one's own culture is riding the crucial timeline of history's self-realization" and accuses the show of using the Third World to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority.<sup>33</sup> In this way, *Primitivism* aimed at advancing the idea of modernist formal language as universal (and of MoMA as its stronghold).<sup>34</sup> Same dynamics can be seen at play in *Magiciens*: creativity from outside not only of Europe but also of modernism and fine arts in general carried the value of authenticity to guarantee the innovative potential and the global (instead of universal) scope of postmodernism.

A glaring asymmetry, on the other hand, prevails in how the West views non-Western modernism. Even if modernism was promoted as universal language, its use was reserved for Western artists. While Picasso's integrity was not seen to be compromised by the integration of tribal motives, the non-Western modern artists have constantly been criticised as derivative, inauthentic, and inferior. Partha Mitter has coined

32 In their original context, the masks were never the immobile object of visual appreciation but part of communal spiritual ceremonies including music, dance, chanting and collective participation that gave them their meaning. See also Foster, *Recordings*, 183.

33 McEvilley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," 59–60.

34 Ibid.

the expression "Picasso manqué syndrome" to describe how an outsider's attempt to use cubist language is always seen lacking in originality or quality: "while successful imitation was a form of aping, imperfect imitation represented a failure of learning."<sup>35</sup>

The visual appearance of Global South modern art is in general largely based on the formal language of cubism or expressionist abstraction but almost always maintains contact with a referent in the visible world; total abstraction or non-figurative art – the apogee of Western modernism – is rare.<sup>36</sup> Artists employed the formal language of cubism because "its revolutionary message furnished ammunition for cultural resistance to colonial empires, as each colonized nation deployed the language of modernism to fight its own particular cultural corner".<sup>37</sup>

The generation of artists which followed Onabolu was engaged in the processes of building the independence of new modern African states. "Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past", exclaimed Uche Okeke in 1960.<sup>38</sup> New era called for new art.

African modern art shared with European modernism the sentiment of modernity, that is, the sense of a change of era, of a struggle against

35 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008), 537, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20619633>. Mitter is writing about modern art in India. He also raises the parallel issue of the significance of Eastern thought for the rise of abstract art.

36 Susan Vogel, "West African artists at the Venice Biennale," in *Fusion: West African artists at the Venice Biennale*, ed. Thomas McEvilley (New York: The Museum of African Art, 1993), 6.

37 Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," 531–48.

38 Uche Okeke, "Natural Synthesis Manifesto," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, eds. Clementine Deliss and Jane Havell (Paris: Flammarion; London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), 208–09.



destructive forces and a belief in a better future. While artists and intellectuals in inter-war Paris were mobilising against the rise of fascism, for their African and Caribbean contemporaries of the Négritude movement, and the Global South in general, the enemy was colonialism. Modernism and modern art were part of independence struggles leading to liberation from the colonial powers.

The tactic of mastering the oppressors' culture, such as Onobolu learning realist painting or the Négritude authors making use of surrealism and Parisian leftist philosophy, was hence a political act, a way of assuming agency as opposed to the position inscribed by the colonial masters.<sup>39</sup> In many places, the artists were also personally involved in politics and took part in the process of building the modern states. They were invited as experts or served as civil servants of the new states or even as the president as did Léopold Sédar Senghor. In India, art was engaged directly in visualising the newly independent state when artists from Santiniketan school led by Nandalal Bose, the pioneer of Indian modern art, were commissioned to illustrate the constitution in 1950.

Third World modernism was part of change, working against the old regimes, both politically and culturally. The way this translated into visual arts took the form of various syncretist approaches. The artists were drawing on their own traditions while coming to terms with the colonizers' culture. Instead of rejecting Western achievements in favour of their own, many artists chose to embrace the best of both. In Nigeria, the movement of Natural Synthesis founded by Uche Okeke advocated the fusion of indigenous visual arts with useful Western techniques and ideas. This was also clearly expressed in the Négritude movement that made use of features from the colonizers' culture. The epitome of this line of thinking was Cannibalismo, the Brazilian movement founded by Oswald de

Andrade's Anthropophagist Manifesto (1928), which promotes the idea of 'digesting', that is interiorising the other by copying and adapting, and integrating any elements that can be used as materials for a new configuration of reality. Other syncretist philosophies include the Caribbean idea of creolization, used by Edouard Glissant, or hybridity, theorised by Homi Bhabha, among others. All these philosophies are grounded in specific histories and places, but they share the view of the productiveness that results from bringing alien elements together.

This kind of openness to external influences and mixing of elements was in direct opposition to modernist idea and more in line with postmodern ethos.<sup>40</sup> With regard to India, Geeta Kapur explains that the artists actually were simultaneously modern and postmodern, hence the mismatch of Western art historical categories. According to her, chronologically India came late to modernism ('late' in the Western calendar) around the mid-century, in tandem with the struggle for independence (similarly to the African nations). More importantly, a specific feature of modern art in India is the abundant narrative content stemming from the local art traditions – rejected by modernism but embraced again by postmodernism.<sup>41</sup>

Reading this art against Western modernism without considering the context (once more a decontextualised art historical reading) leads to misinterpretation or even to epistemic injustice. Modernism of the Global South has rarely been invited to Western shows.<sup>42</sup> It was shown

40 Poppi, "African Art and Globalisation". With its thirst for the new and its fallacy of originality, the West has often been unable to see the inventiveness of adaptation.

41 Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism in India?* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000 [1992]).

42 A notable exception is *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* curated by Clémentine Deliss in Whitechapel Gallery in 1995. Deliss and Havell, *Seven Stories*. Also *Africa Explores* exhibition in 1991 included a section under the title "International Art", see Vogel, *Africa Explores*.

39 Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism," 245–48.

in Havana biennials, and African modern art was included in Dakar festival in 1966 as well as in Dak'Art biennials since the 1990s. Venice Biennale 2024 is now writing art history anew by including a large survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century art from outside Euro-America, curated by Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa. (At the time of writing this article it has only just opened, so cannot be considered here.) But can non-Western art ever be understood by Western art history and its categories (or canons)? And can the non-Western world trust Western art history when its art has been distorted by narrating it as a derivation of the West? Can art history be global? Should we have art history as a single discipline or multiple art histories?<sup>43</sup>

To the definition of canon in the beginning of this text as a shared body of knowledge we could add a further dimension: As core elements of the discipline of art history canons are regimes of belief. They are sustained and renewed by a shared understanding and continuous collective investment in them. Pierre Bourdieu uses the Latin *illusio* to illustrate the shared belief that holds together a field.<sup>44</sup> In this way a discipline, such as history of art, functions as any 'magic' community gathered around a belief system. It is not without a reason that in the earlier quote McEvelley calls the belief in Hegelian view of history "a tribal superstition". The above cases show Europeans absorbing elements of foreign realms into their own belief system (art) but at the same time denying the same right of others.

Established canons enhance the power of the narrator, and the powerful narrator reproduces the established stories. What would an alternative story look like, narrated from the opposite viewpoint?

43 These questions are addressed by James Elkins, among others. Elkins ed., *Is Art History Global?*

44 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Polity Press, 1996).

## Epilogue: Picasso as African art history

A few years after the Dakar Festival in 1966, Senghor organised Picasso's exhibition in Dakar in 1972. It had more than 200 works by Picasso and attracted 13 000 visitors. The reception, according to the press, was mostly excited and interested, although some sceptical opinions were heard too. The exhibition left permanent marks on some artists. They were still fresh 50 years later in 2022, when another exhibition around Picasso opened in Dakar, in Musée des civilisations noires.

Organised by four museums – two in Paris, two in Dakar – the exhibition brought together artworks, objects from ethnographic collections, and documentary material. The historical documents showed Picasso's and his contemporaries' life surrounded by African objects on the mantelpiece and were combined with real items in the exhibition space. Artworks were shown together with objects that inspired them. The show also drew attention to Picasso's passion for human-animal combinations and the connection with sacred objects. The designer of the exhibition, artist Fodé Camara remembers visiting the 1972 exhibition as a teenager and the impression it made on him; today he is an artist himself. He even lent his catalogue from 50 ago to the exhibition.<sup>45</sup>

I want to interpret the exhibition as a cultural counterpoint in the usual story of Picasso and Modernism: Here Picasso serves, on the one hand, as a reference to collections of traditional African art and, on the other, as an inspiration for modern art in Senegal. In the exhibition, Picasso is a chapter in the story of West African culture, rather than the main protagonist. The poster

45 Valérie Marin La Meslée, "Picasso l'Africain, de retour à Dakar," *Le Point*, April 3, 2022, [https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/picasso-l-africain-de-retour-a-dakar-03-04-2022-2470741\\_3.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/picasso-l-africain-de-retour-a-dakar-03-04-2022-2470741_3.php).

of the exhibition speaks volumes: Once again there is a juxtaposition of a mask (by Gouro / Baoulé people of the Ivory Coast) and a work by Picasso, but this time the mask is placed slightly above Picasso's study for *Demoiselles* and seems to observe it calmly from its elevated position, benignly reconciling with history.

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**Kaija Kaitavuori** works as lecturer at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and as visiting lecturer and docent at the University of Helsinki. She received her PhD in 2015 from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. The scope of her research spans contemporary art, cultural institutions, participation, and global dimensions of the artworld.

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