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.

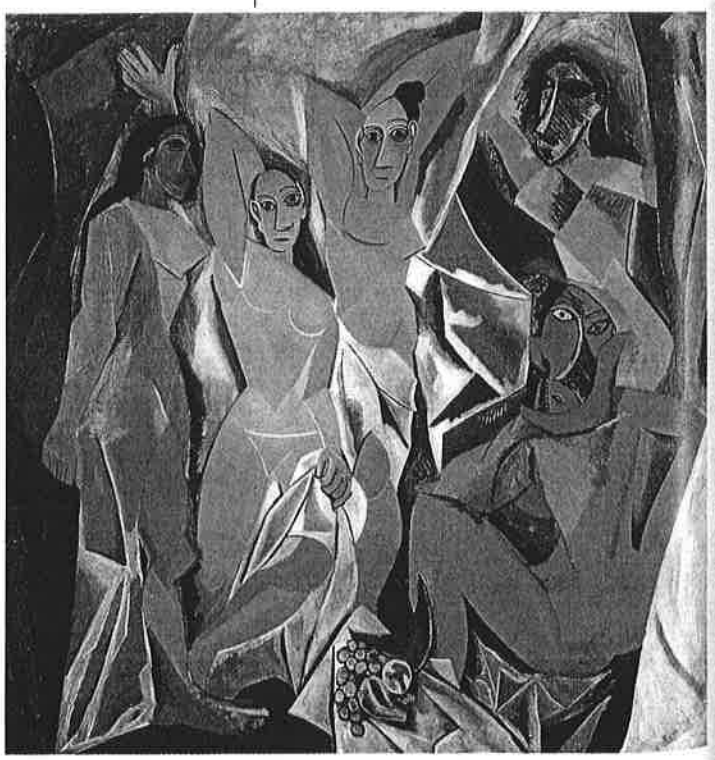
MASKS. Wooden masks were used in ritual performances with complex musical rhythms, dances, and costumes. For their full impact, they should be thought of in motion, surrounded by colorful garments and the rapid swaying and rustling of raffia skirts and arm fringes.

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 Demoiselles d'Avignon." (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.

"Kagle" (mask), c. 1775–1825, Dan, Rietberg Museum, Zürich. *African masks were typically lozenge-shaped, with wedge noses and almondlike eyes.*



Picasso, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," 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.

"Couple," n.d., wood, Dogon, Mali, The Barnes Foundation, PA.

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

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

MEXICAN MURALISTS: José 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.

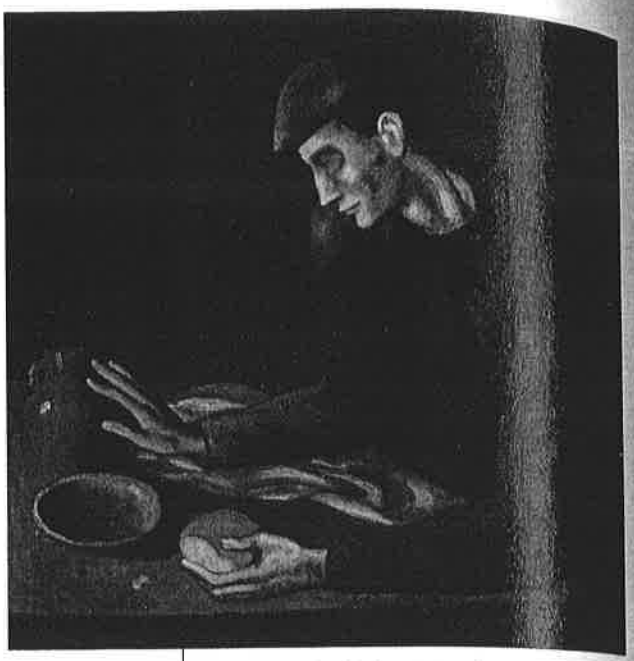
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS: The impermanence of Navaho sand paintings, destroyed at the end of a rite, influenced Abstract Expressionists to focus on the process of artistic creation rather than the end product.

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

***PICASSO:* THE KING OF MODERN ART.** "When I was a child, my mother said to me, 'If you become a soldier, you'll be a general. If you become a monk, you'll end up as the Pope,'" Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) told his mistress Françoise Gilot. "Instead," he added, "I became a painter and wound up as Picasso."

For half a century, Picasso led the forces of artistic innovation, shocking the world by introducing a new style and then moving on as soon as his unorthodoxy became accepted. His most significant contribution — aided by Braque — was inventing Cubism, the major revolution of twentieth-century art. Until the age of 91 Picasso remained vital and versatile. Probably the most prolific Western artist ever, Picasso produced an estimated 50,000 works.

Picasso could draw before he could talk. His first words at age two were "pencil, pencil," as he beggged for a drawing tool. Born in Spain the son of a mediocre painter, by his mid-teens Picasso had mastered the art of drawing with photographic accuracy. When he visited an exhibit of children's art in 1946, he remarked at that age he could draw like Raphael, but "it took me many years to learn how to draw like these children."



Picasso, "The Blindman's Meal," 1903, MMA, NY. *Picasso's melancholy "Blue Period" paintings portray thin, suffering beggars and tramps.*

Although Picasso worked in a number of distinctive styles, his art was always autobiographical. "The paintings," he said, "are the pages of my diary." Walking through the chronological sequence of work in Paris's Musée Picasso is like wandering the corridors of his love life. Women were his chief source of inspiration.

BLUE PERIOD. Picasso's first original style grew out of his down-and-out years as an impoverished artist. The Blue Period of 1901–4 is so called because of the cool indigo and cobalt blue shades Picasso used. The paintings, obsessed with scrawny blind beggars and derelicts, literally project the "blues" that seized Picasso during this period, when he had to burn his sketches for fuel. Working without recognition, he elongated the limbs of his bony figures until they looked like starved El Grecos.

ROSE PERIOD. As soon as Picasso settled full-time in Paris (he spent his working career in France) and met his first love, Fernande Olivier, his depression vanished. He began to use delicate pinks and earth colors to paint circus performers like harlequins and acrobats. The paintings of this Rose, or Circus, Period (1905–6) are sentimental and romantic.

Picasso, "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard," 1915, MMA, NY.

Picasso, "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard," 1910, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

VOLLARD CUBED. *"I have no idea whether I'm a great painter," Picasso said, "but I am a great draftsman." Although he could draw likenesses as precisely as Ingres, he chose to invent new forms rather than perpetuate the old. In the Analytic Cubist portrait of Vollard, Picasso broke the subject into a crystallike structure of interlocking facets in subdued colors.*

ANATOMY OF A MASTERPIECE

During the Spanish Civil War, fascist dictator Francisco Franco hired the Nazi Lüftwaffe to destroy the small Basque town of Guernica. For three hours warplanes dropped bombs, slaughtering 2,000 civilians, wounding thousands more, and razing the undefended town. The Spaniard Picasso, filled with patriotic rage, created the 25-foot-wide by 11-foot-high mural in one month. It is considered the most powerful indictment ever of the horrors of war. "Painting is not done to decorate apartments," Picasso said. "It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy."

Picasso incorporated certain design elements to create a powerful effect of anguish. He used a black-white-gray palette to emphasize hopelessness and purposely distorted figures to evoke violence. The jagged lines and shattered planes of Cubism denote terror and confusion, while a pyramid format holds the composition together. Some of Picasso's symbols, like the slain fighter with a broken sword implying defeat, are not hard to decipher. Picasso's only explanation of his symbols was: "The bull is not fascism, but it is brutality and darkness. . . . The horse represents the people."

Picasso, "Guernica," 1937, Reina Sofia Art Center, Madrid.

"NEGRO" PERIOD. Picasso discovered the power of abstracted African masks around 1907, incorporating their motifs into his art. In the same year he produced the breakthrough painting "Demoiselles d'Avignon," one of the few works that singlehandedly altered the course of art.

HARBINGER OF CUBISM: "LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON." Called the first truly twentieth-century painting, "Demoiselles" (see p. 22) effectively ended the nearly 500-year reign of Renaissance-ruled Western art. The most radical shift since works by Giotto and Masaccio, it shattered every precept of artistic convention. Picasso's five nudes are hazy on anatomy, with lop-sided eyes, deformed ears, and dislocated limbs. Picasso also fractured the laws of perspective, breaking up space into jagged planes without orderly recession — even presenting the eye of one figure from a frontal view and face in profile. Picasso smashed bodies to bits and reassembled them as faceted planes that one critic compared to a "field of broken glass."

The aggressive ugliness of the women repelled visitors to Picasso's studio. Matisse thought the painting a hoax and Braque, shaken, said, "It is like drinking kerosene in order to spit fire." The modern writer Gertrude Stein, Picasso's friend and patron (whose own portrait by Picasso was less than flattering, although she admitted, "For me, it is I") defended his daring: "Every masterpiece has come into the world with a dose of ugliness in it. This ugliness is a sign of the creator's struggle to say something new."

"I paint what I know," Picasso said, "not what I see." Inspired by Cézanne's geometric patterns, Picasso broke reality into shards representing multiple views of an object seen from front, rear, and back simultaneously.

SCULPTURE. Picasso shook up sculpture as thoroughly as he did painting. In 1912 his "Guitar" sheet metal assemblage completely broke with traditional methods of carving or modeling marble or clay. One of the first to use found objects, Picasso transformed the unlikeliest materials into sculpture, as in his "Head of a Bull" composed of a bicycle seat and handlebars.

DIVERSITY. After World War I, Picasso experimented with widely differing styles, drawing faithful likenesses one day and violently distorted figures the next. "To copy others is necessary," Picasso believed, "but to copy oneself is pathetic." With such miscellaneous talents and interests, there could be no smooth sequence of "early," "middle," and "late" styles.

A restless explorer constantly re-inventing the shape of art, Picasso summed up his career in the words: "I love discovering things." As his friend Gertrude Stein put it, "He alone among painters did not set himself the problem of expressing truths which all the world can see, but the truth which only he can see."