Collecting African Art: Part Three – Aesthetics



Large sculpture designed by Picasso in Chicago's Daley Center – one can see how much Picasso's work was influenced by African art

By Misaki Imagawa

In the previous two parts of this series we discussed the importance of authenticity in traditional African art and the role of provenance. African art does not exist in a vacuum, and its value is not solely dictated by age and rarity. Instead, the greatest enhancement to value and collectability is genuineness or authenticity; in other words, the authentic nature of the work. Provenance alone cannot ascertain the authenticity of traditional African art because, ultimately, it is a *feeling* largely based on aesthetics that tells us whether a piece is genuine or fake.



This Chiwara headdress by the · Bamana people of Mali illustrates a perfect example of the abstract · qualities found in traditional African · art

Item #A1300-168

During the early 20th century African art began impacting the western art world when a group of artists known as the School of Paris friends began incorporating certain elements into their works. Their names and artworks are now promoted by first rate auctioneers across the world: Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Joan Miro, Constantin Brancusi, among others. It’s no surprise how much influence African art has had since it first impacted the development of modern art. However, back in those days the artists most influenced by African art were merely a group of unknowns struggling to deviate from the naturalism and academics that dominated the post-Impressionist art world.



Above: A Passport mask from the Chamba people and carved mask from the Bamana people display · qualities adopted by the School of Paris painters

Item #A1200-023 and A1207-067



Mask · Bamana / Bambara people · Mali, West Africa · Carved wood

Item #A1207-067

A famous account tells of Picasso visiting the African art collection at Trocadéro in 1907. The musty galleries and some of the artworks Picasso found brutish, but at the same time he was unable to look away from the elegance he found in many unusual figural sculptures. He later described African art as magical. For Picasso and many others, like Matisse, their encounter with African art was a turning point in their careers. They began to blend the highly stylized human representation of African art into pre-existing western painting styles. This resulted in flat, angular and fragmented humanoid shapes of vivid coloring – the style that would later be called Cubism.



Above: Figurative knife currency by · the Azande people of the Republic of Congo
Item #A1300-373

Other artists, such as Modigliani, took a more direct approach. Inspired by masks and figures from the Baule tribe in Cote d'Ivoire, his portrait paintings took on elongated, heart-shaped faces with narrow chins and a small mouth positioned unnaturally low. Interestingly, the School of Paris artists knew nothing about African art or culture, yet they recognized a certain spiritual aspect residing in tribal masks and sculptures. This *feeling* propelled them to reach greater heights of artistic expression. These avant-garde artists of the early 1900s, their dealers, and the leading art critics of the time were also the first Europeans to start seriously collecting African art, not because they were foreign and barbaric but because they found a genuine aesthetic appeal in them.



Mbolo portrait mask by the Baule people illustrates their tribal ideals of smooth skin and decorative scarification marks

Item #A1200-636

When it comes to African figural art, there are several ways to judge aesthetics. For example, youthfulness and luminosity are physical representations of beauty. To be young is to be full of vigor and productivity. The smooth surfaces of many African figures represent shining, healthy skin, often decorated with tribal scarifications that mark beauty. Posture is also important. The erect self-composure of figural sculpture may speak to an inner virtue. A composed person behaves rationally in a controlled way, and so it might be said a particular statue is proud and dignified. Yet, figural sculptures are not meant to be exact likenesses of humans. They *resemble* human beings. African art is not an art of likenesses – it is an art of representation – and in the recognition of this aesthetic can be found immeasurable beauty.

The highly stylized and disproportionate figures that inspired the School of Paris artists are in fact the core of African art aesthetics. The human form is often exaggerated to represent and idealize certain features and body parts. This idealization, exaggeration and embellishment are less about physical aspects than about symbolic elements and ideas. For example, the head is often portrayed much larger than real life proportions because humankind's greatest gift of thought and rationalization is found within its confines. African art is a visual language that does not represent the world as we see it, but through human ideals, emotions, virtues and faith.

Traditional African art is not 'art for art's sake' – it is art for the purpose of developing a greater understanding of the self and the world, of finding a deeper, meaningful way of life. The countless statues and objects that have been created – even utilitarian objects – often represent morals, symbolize ideals, tell stories, speak languages, and inspire belief. This is art with a purpose found outside any statement of the ego. The School of Paris artists were among the first outsiders to recognize value in the aesthetics of African art, but they were certainly not the last. The connection they felt to African art is unique, but not singular. It is a raw, visceral response felt everyday all over the world. To some, African art may appear jarring, brutish or primitive, but it is ultimately appreciated the same way as any other work of art – aesthetically – through its appearance, by speaking in a way that stirs your emotions and captivates your imagination.



Although these Mambila medicine pots may seem jarring and brutish, they have the capacity to stir up the emotions of anyone who views them

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