

# Picasso and Africa: Are we asking the right questions?

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There is no doubt that Europe has stolen, and continues to steal from Africa. Thieves by nature do not usually disclose the sources of their wealth and therefore it is at times necessary to challenge and expose them. Personally I suspect that the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition attracted such high levels of interest and support on the part of our President and Minister of Arts & Culture precisely because here is one example where a case for Europe's debt to Africa can be made. However I believe that centering the debate on the question of Picasso's debt to Africa should not be the focus of our intellectual enquiry at this point in time.

Firstly it is important to recognise that Picasso set an important precedent for the right of the artist to engage with cultures outside of the narrow confines of one's own. He was not the first to do this, but a very dramatic and visible example. We can debate forever whether he stole more than he gave, and for people whose primary project is Picasso, this may well still be a relevant discourse. However there is a more important question, from an African perspective, indeed from anywhere that is excluded from what in broad terms is commonly referred to as the West. That question is: have all artists, or do all artists enjoy this same right to engage with the other without being seen to compromise their own integrity and value as artists and as individuals, or is this a right reserved for the dominant powers?

To begin to answer this question one can look at what were some of the major consequences of Picasso's discovery of African art 100 years ago for the development of art in Africa. The first observation that can be made is that the interest of the European avant-garde in the cultural produce of Africa did contribute to a gradual recognition that this supposedly uncivilised continent did in fact have a rich history of art and culture, and slowly, very slowly art from Africa began to move from the ethnographic to the art museum. A discourse in African art began to emerge with institutions and an industry to match. Notably this development tended to run adjacent to mainstream art institutions and journals, separate and unequal. An important development in the 20th century was the emergence of a canon of so-called traditional art, defined by ethnicity (closely linked to colonial constructions of tribal identities), and characterised by an ahistorical approach to culture that persistently misrepresented the history of Africa as an essentially static one that apparently only began to grapple with change with the arrival of Europeans on the continent, particularly post the 1884 Berlin conference where dominant European powers shared amongst themselves a continent that was not theirs.

The emergence of a canon of African art had major consequences for artists in Africa. Effectively they were now expected to produce works that conformed with this canon, or be measured against it, despite the fact that to a large extent the systems of patronage that gave rise to these canonical forms had undergone a major rupture with colonialism. A whole industry developed on the back of distinguishing an 'authentic' piece of African art from a 'fake' one. The notion of a modern African art did not even enter into this conservative model. The irony here is that the concession of art to Africa applied in practice to the art of its past, and not its present.

The construction of an African 'authenticity' framed by ahistorical notions of tradition was complemented by the emergence of a related discourse, primitivism. After initially being denied the right to be modern, Africans began to find that they could make 'modern art' so long as it conformed to western notions of the untutored, unspoilt artist. The beginnings of this new trend can be traced back to a host of art initiatives by expatriate artists, teachers and priests across Africa dating back to the 1920s. A characteristic of this movement was an emphasis on 'non-directive' teaching in order to not corrupt the unspoilt native. This neo-primitivist trend reached its apex with landmark exhibitions in Europe and the USA in the late 1980s and early to mid 1990s. I am radically simplifying historical processes and intellectual discourses here, but the important point to emphasise is that the development of a modern art in Africa was framed in terms of its relationship to a western discourse, primitivism. On the other hand works that revealed a more conscious engagement with the dominant modernist discourses were regularly denounced as lacking in 'authenticity' and tantamount at best to second rate modernism. It is only comparatively recently that scholars have begun articulating that the production of modern and contemporary art in Africa needs to be considered critically in terms of its own context, a context that has to large extent been framed by its relationship to colonial rule, struggles for decolonisation, neo-colonialism and the post-colonial condition.

My main concerns about the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition are that this is essentially about Picasso, a very important artist no doubt, and the pivotal point of an entire Picasso centred industry. In contrast to this there is very little investment going into understanding the consequences of Picasso and the western modernist project on the development of art in Africa. Is Picasso of such supreme importance that one can possibly justify that there have been many more books and exhibitions on Picasso than on the entire 20th and 21st century artistic production of Africa? The amount of ink spent on debating relatively inconsequential details such as whether Picasso, Matisse, Vlaminck or Derain were the first to 'discover' African art compared to the comparative dearth of information on Africa's most important artists should be a cause for alarm, and a call to action. How long will it take before African institutions have the capacity to curate retrospective exhibitions of our pioneering modern artists: Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Ibrahim el Salahi, Sam Ntiro, Malangatana, and many more? It is true that South Africa has made a start with important retrospective exhibitions of seminal artists, but we still have the anomaly of important exhibitions appearing without catalogues: Dumile Feni being the most obvious example of this.

Returning to the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition one can ask: how will this exhibition change or impact on the dominant views of art in Africa? Since there appears to be

no focus on the question of a modern or contemporary African art, it is clear that the only 'African art' that enters the frame conforms to the conservative notions of a traditional, canonical African art. The display of discreet, dramatically lit objects conforms to the established conventions of displaying canonical African art. This display does nothing to elucidate their historical value in an African context, nor for that matter does this type of display shed any light on Picasso's discovery since this is certainly not how similar objects would have been presented at the Trocadero. All that we have is a maintenance of the status quo.

Even if we accept the narrow, conservative definition of African art as a canonical traditional one, which we shouldn't, then one can still ask: if Picasso's discovery elevated the art of Africa from the ethnographic to the art museum then why are the Lydenberg Heads still housed in the South African Museum and not prominently displayed at the South African National Gallery? This example of a failure of a supposedly African institution to integrate its own art history into a dominant art discourse is all the more alarming if we consider that no one knows what the original function of these remarkably imposing sculptures was. If the notion of culturally contextualising the art of Africa was one of the excuses for retaining it outside of the dominant art museum (which apparently needed no cultural contextualisation), then what is the theoretical basis for retaining these sculptures as ethnographic objects at the expense of celebrating that Africa, including South Africa, has a history of making art that precedes the arrival of western civilisation on the continent? Should we be arguing about reclaiming Africa's impact on western art, when we have barely begun to acknowledge our own art history?

If we are to return to questions of theft, then I will conclude by asking: Have we not robbed ourselves as Africans of the opportunity to critically engage with our own art history? Are we not perpetuating the falsehoods of the mythology of the 'dark continent' by squandering opportunities for real enlightenment?