

Picasso's African Period

Picasso's African Period, which lasted from 1906 to 1909, was the period when Pablo Picasso painted in a style which was strongly influenced by African sculpture, particularly traditional African masks and art of ancient Egypt, in addition to non-African influences including Iberian sculpture, and the art of Paul Cézanne and El Greco. This proto-Cubist period following Picasso's Blue Period and Rose Period has also been called the Negro Period,^[1] or Black Period.^{[2][3]} Picasso collected and drew inspiration from African art during this period, but also for many years after it.^[4]

Context and period

In the early 20th century, African artworks were being brought to Paris as a consequence of the expansion of the French empire into Sub-Saharan Africa. The press was abuzz with exaggerated stories of cannibalism and exotic tales about the African kingdom of Dahomey. The mistreatment of Africans in the Belgian Congo was exposed in Joseph Conrad's popular book *Heart of Darkness*. It was perhaps due to this climate that Picasso and other artists began looking towards African art for inspiration. Picasso's interest in African art was sparked partly by Henri Matisse who showed him a wooden Kongo-Vili figurine.^[5]

In May or June 1907, Picasso experienced a "revelation" while viewing African art at the ethnographic museum at the Palais du Trocadéro.^{[6][7]} Picasso's discovery of African art influenced aspects of his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. version O) (completed in July of that year), especially in the treatment of the faces of two figures on right side of the composition. Although many modern art curators have attempted to match individual African masks with the faces of these figures, the African masks used in these examples have not always been accurate, and the artist took ideas from multiple works.^[8]

Picasso continued to develop a style derived from African, Egyptian, and Iberian art during the years prior to the start of the analytic cubism phase of his painting in 1910. Other works of Picasso's African Period include the *Bust of a Woman* (1907, in the National Gallery, Prague); *Mother and Child* (Summer 1907, Musée Picasso, Paris); *Nude with Raised Arms* (1907, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, Spain); and *Three Women* (Summer 1908, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg).



Les Femmes d'Alger. The two figures on the right are the beginnings of Picasso's African period.

Controversy

In historical reflection, a few issues have been pointed out including questioning the origins of this genre of art for Picasso. Primitivism as an aesthetic was often used by Europeans borrowing from non-Western cultures.^[9] While it is clear Picasso was inspired heavily by aesthetics from cultures not his own, many art historians and critics have argued that this sort of borrowing was a modernist expression.^[10]

Art historian Kobena Mercer covers Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in his book on black diasporic art titled *Travel and See*. He argues Picasso's stylistic change towards an African inspired aesthetic was individualistic and modern while minority artists receive little to no recognition for their work inspired by their own culture.^[11]

It could also be seen as problematic that in *Demoiselles d'Avignon* the women painted wearing African-like masks are meant to be prostitutes from Barcelona's red-light district. Picasso masks these white bodies in order to make their sexualization acceptable to a European audience.^[12] Picasso himself though said about painting "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." To him, these masks were a people's connection between themselves and the hostile universe he wanted his art to confront.^[13]



In February 2006, an exhibition titled "Picasso and Africa" showcasing Picasso's work from his African period as well as many African sculptures similar to ones he would have been inspired by were shown side by side in Johannesburg, South Africa at the Standard Bank Gallery. A curator involved in the exhibition, Marilyn Martin quoted to an article for the Guardian "Picasso never copied African art, which is why this show does not match a specific African work with a Picasso", the goal of the exhibition was not to accuse Picasso of stealing but to show how he transcended it and created a new aesthetic combining his own and his inspiration.^[14]

Image gallery



Pablo Picasso, 1907, *Nu à la serviette*, oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm



Pablo Picasso, 1907, *Femme nue*, oil on canvas, 92 x 43 cm, Museo delle Culture, Milano



Pablo Picasso, 1907, *Nu aux bras levés (Nude)*



Pablo Picasso, 1907, *Head of a Sleeping Woman (Study for Nude with Drapery)*, oil on canvas, 61.4 x 47.6 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Pablo Picasso, 1907-08, *Vase of Flowers*, oil on canvas, 92.1 x 73 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Pablo Picasso, 1908, *Bols et flacons (Pitcher and Bowls)*, oil on canvas, 66 x 50.5 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia



Pablo Picasso, 1908, *Dryad*, oil on canvas, 185 x 108 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



Pablo Picasso, 1908, *Trois femmes (Three Women)*, oil on canvas, 200 x 185 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



Pablo Picasso, 1908, *Seated Woman (Meditation)*, oil on canvas, 150 x 99 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



Pablo Picasso, 1908, *Paysage aux deux figures (Landscape with Two Figures)*, oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris



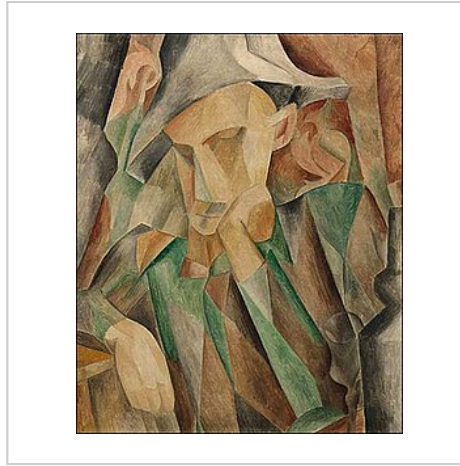
Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Nature morte à la brioche*



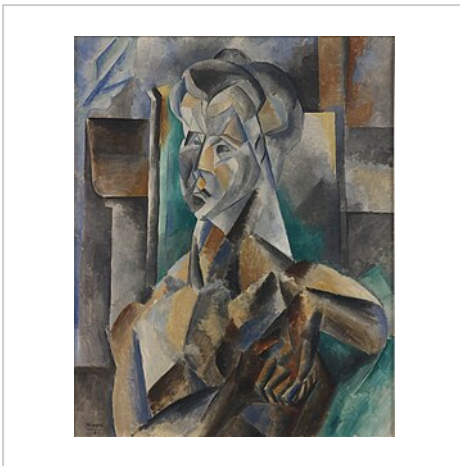
Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Brick Factory at Tortosa (L'Usine, Horta de Ebro)*, oil on canvas, 50.7 x 60.2 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



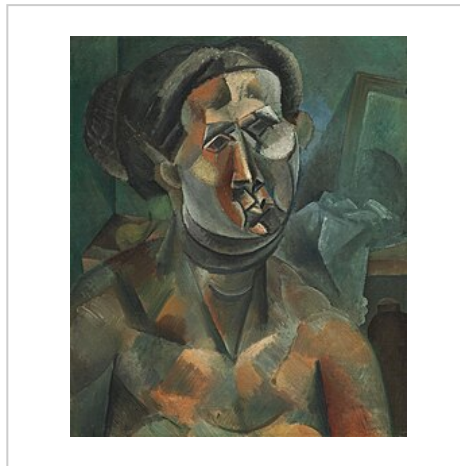
Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Maisons à Horta (Houses on the Hill, Horta de Ebro)*, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm, private collection



Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Harlequin (L'Arlequin)*



Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Buste de femme (Femme en vert, Femme assise)*, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 81.3 cm, Van Abbemuseum, Netherlands. This painting from the collection of Wilhelm Uhde was confiscated by the French state and sold at the Hôtel Drouot in 1921



Pablo Picasso, 1909, *Head of a Woman (Tête de femme)*, oil on canvas, 60.3 x 51.1 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago

See also

- List of Picasso artworks 1901–1910

Notes

1. Howells 2003, p. 66.
2. Christopher Green, 2009, Cubism, MoMA, Grove Art Online, Oxford University Press (http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10068§ion_id=T020541#skipToContent)

3. Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch* (<https://archive.org/stream/cubistepoch00coop#page/n0/mode/2up>), London: Phaidon in association with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art & the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970. ISBN 0-87587-041-4
4. Peter Stepan, *Picasso's Collection of African & Oceanic Art: Masters of Metamorphosis*, Munich: Presel, 2006.
5. Matisse may have purchased this piece from Emile Heymann's shop of non-western artworks in Paris, see PabloPicasso.org (<http://www.pablocicasso.org/africanperiod.jsp>).
6. Picasso, Rubin, and Fluegel 1980, p. 87.
7. The artists and writers close to him long claimed this visit to the museum took place later, maybe even after the painting was completed.
8. Joshua I. Cohen, "Picasso's African Influences," in *The "Black Art" Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism across Continents*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2020.
9. "Centre Investigador en Art Primitiu i Primitivisme (UPF)" (<https://www.upf.edu/en/web/ciap/inici>).
10. Burgard, Timothy Anglin (1991). "Picasso and Appropriation". *The Art Bulletin*. **73** (3): 479–494. doi:10.2307/3045817 (<https://doi.org/10.2307%2F3045817>). JSTOR 3045817 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3045817>).
11. Mercer, Kobena (2016). *Travel and See*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p. 236.
12. "Pablo Picasso. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. Paris, June-July 1907 | MoMA" (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>).
13. Meldrum, Andrew (15 March 2006). "Andrew Meldrum: How much did Picasso's paintings borrow from African art?" (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/mar/15/art>). *The Guardian*.
14. Meldrum, Andrew (15 March 2006). "Andrew Meldrum: How much did Picasso's paintings borrow from African art?" (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/mar/15/art>). *The Guardian*.

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