

Module 5 Overview

African Art and Modernity



For this module, we are looking at how African art was perceived in the first wave of major African art exhibitions in the United States and Europe in the 1990s. Our first two readings are introductory pieces from an exhibition called *Africa, the Art of a Continent*, by two renowned black scholars, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah. In his essay, Gates breaks down the philosophical hurdles regarding African art in the European imagination. He talks about Conte, Hagle and Freud, and how African art was read and experienced through the philosophical framework set up by these and other earlier European thinkers, all the way back into the 19th and 20th centuries. His noteworthy analysis of Pablo Picasso goes deep into Picasso's early denials of African influences in his work, and finally comes out with the admission many years later. Gates makes the illusion to Picasso "Exercising the demons of his artistic antecedents". So this revelation went much deeper than just Picasso's inspiration from African art, but it revealed a European anxiety about the origins of modernism. In fact, as you will see in this week's slideshow, many other artists of the same period were heavily influenced by African art. The second article for you all to read this week is by another very important scholar, Kwame Anthony Appiah. He brings up another key theme in this course, that is that Africa is richly diverse and it has a certain unity that's built up by a shared history and shared origins, but it cannot be boiled down to one African essence. In art, he resists the temptations to sentimentalize artworks coming from Africa, but rather to take them seriously as historical, functional, and aesthetic objects. There's also the question of context, and the role that curators and art institutions, like the museum and the art market play in our understandings of African art. This is the idea that we will deal with in depth next week, but here, it is worth considering that once art objects are pulled out of their original contexts, new meanings are ascribed to them by people who arrange them and by those that view them. What we see and know as African art has been heavily mediated, both historically and in the present day, to affect our knowledge and experience of it. Our next article this week is written by Susan Vogel, an American art historian, who in the 1980s and 1990s became the leading scholar and curator of African art. Her central premise also deals with the importance of acknowledging our own cultural bias when viewing African art, and how the many different conditions in which the art is installed and presented affects our experience and viewing of it. She goes into his historical deconstruction of the museum system, and how it has affected the study and exhibition of African art. Vogel compares the cluttered layouts of the curiosity cabinets that has African art objects in the 19th and early 20th century to the more contemporary trend of pulling out single objects for aesthetic contemplation. Today, the museum aesthetic is one of clean white walls, not cluttered with objects, intermittently arranged to emphasize their originality. Pulling African art out of its functional context as part of a larger culture displaces the object and puts it in a Western framework. She also talks at length about a topic that we have seen come up several times since the beginning of the semester, the fact that most African languages do not have a word for art. This very likely fueled early ideas about discovery of African art, since the concept was judged to not exist, according to the lack of the semantic equivalent, to the word art in African languages. Vogel deconstructs this idea by writing about African languages having many other words that indicated artistry, words for embellished, decorated, beautified, and out of the ordinary. Moving back to the slideshow for this week, what is important to note is that rather than being purely representational, the famous modern European artists here used figurative abstraction inspired by African art. These artworks inspired a huge debate about art in general. Was it not meant to be perfect, representational, beautiful? Modern artists challenged this notion of

beauty in a very fundamental way, and opened the terrain of artistic possibilities for the arts. It has to be acknowledged that this important conversation was facilitated and inspired by African art.



Learning Objectives

Course Learning Objectives Targeted

- Identify critical historical moments and art movements in African art by exploring key periods, such as ancient civilizations, colonialism, and contemporary movements, and their influence on artistic expression across the continent.
- Critically engage with art historical texts related to African art by analyzing scholarly interpretations, methodologies, and debates, and applying theoretical frameworks to develop informed perspectives.
- Evaluate the historical and global significance of African art by examining its role in shaping cultural identities, resisting colonialism, and influencing international art movements, while considering its socio-political, economic, and cultural implications.

Module Learning Objectives

- Critically assess the impact of African art as a major influence on Western artistic inspiration.
- Identify and explain the philosophical frameworks of Conte, Hagle, and Freud that shaped European understanding of African art
- Assess how Western cultural biases have historically influenced perceptions of African art.



Activities and Assignments

1. Read/Review:

1. ["Europe, African Arts, and the Uncanny" by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587168/download?wrap=1)
(<https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587168/download?wrap=1>)
2. ["Why Africa? Why Art?" by Kwame Anthony Appiah](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587185/download?wrap=1)
(<https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587185/download?wrap=1>)
3. ["Introduction to Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections" Susan Vogel](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587181/download?wrap=1)
(<https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587181/download?wrap=1>)
4. [African Influence on Modernist Art \(Slides\)](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587160/download?wrap=1)
(<https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587160/download?wrap=1>)

2. Complete **Module 5 Discussion**

3. Complete **Module 5 Quiz**

The instructional material listed above will help you understand expectations related to this module's topics, achieve the learning objectives and complete the assignment(s).