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## **The Use of Primitivism in Some Twentieth Century Western Art Styles and Movements**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the concept of “primitivism” as used in some twentieth century Western art movements. It also aims at highlighting the impact of this art form on Western art styles. The method used to explore its usage is based on the art-historical approach of formalism. Modern African scholars often see “Primitivism” as a derogatory terminology. However, this notion, which is directed at Africa South of the Sahara, Oceanic and the cultures of the Americas, has contributed in no small way to the evolution and dynamism of some twentieth century Western art styles and movements.*

### **Introduction**

Primitivism can be described as the adoption of a primitive lifestyle or technique (pearsal, 1999). Janson (1986) sees primitivism as a convenient label for a way of life that has passed through the Neolithic revolution without showing signs of evolution. It can also be viewed as a condition in which our remote ancestors lived (Gombrich, 1995). Areas associated with this designation include; Africa south of the Sahara, Islands of south pacific and the Americas.

In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, the Oxford dictionary of art(2001) describes the term as the use by Western modernist artist of forms or imagery derived from the arts of the so-called “primitive” peoples, particularly those who had been colonized by Western countries.

On the other hand, the term primitivism can be seen as highly derogative, particularly as regards, African art. Willett (2000) argues that the word primitive in its basic sense is “primary in time” and by extension under developed, simple, crude and unsophisticated. He further postulates that to him, primitive art is none of these and that the most primitive art is the Old Stone Age cave paintings of Europe. And that a great deal of the twentieth century Western art should be embraced under the term “primitive art”. That it is a negative not a positive concept. He however concluded that “traditional” be used instead of primitive to associate with the so-called “primitive” cultures of Africa, Oceanic or America art.

### **Method**

This study however, attempts to analyze the impact of some of these traditional forms on a number of twentieth century western art movements. The method used to assess the works would be based on the art historical technique of formalism.

### **Its Application on Some Twentieth Century Western Art Movements**

Primitivism is a term synonymous with the world primordial which was embraced extensively in the twentieth century by a number of Avant garde artists. It is however important to know that the twentieth century brought about immense changes in western culture. These changes affected all facets of Western society including their political, social, economic, scientific and artistic lives.

The changes that occurred in the arts involved new possibilities of art creation, innovations, and expressions. Western artist became fed up with the five centuries of Renaissance and naturalistic depictions, hence the need arose to embrace the arts of other cultures like Africa, Oceanic and the Americas. Fortunately, that was the period quite a number of African objects found their way into some ethnographic institutions in the west.

Some of the Western art movements which embraced these traditional cultural imagery, form and style includes; Fauvism, Cubism and Die Brücke.

### **Formalism**

Formalism is an art-historical approach which deals with the belief that aesthetic values are autonomous and self-sufficient (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001). In other words, as Adams (2001) posits, a work of art can be viewed independently of its context, function and content.

The fauves being the first expressionist group embraced African and Oceanic art forms as some of its influences. Henri Matisse (1869-1954) a French painter, sculptor, graphic artist and designer was highly inspired by Arabesque, African and Oceanic art forms. He was the leading figure of the fauves which was formed in 1905 and dissolved in 1908. Some of their attributes can be seen in one of his most popular work titled “Red room (Harmony in red (**fig.1**)).

Here, the arabesque quality is noticeable. The scroll-like branches which are depicted on the table are repeated on the red walled background. Details of objects are intentionally omitted. Even the female figure in the picture, seems not to be the object of the painting, rather, the colour and decorations were the major concentrations. The African influence can be seen in the careful omission of details which Matisse achieved with the furniture, vegetation and fruits.

Another distinctive individual often regarded as the most prolific, versatile and renowned artist of the twentieth century was Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) a Spanish painter, sculptor, graphic artist, ceramicist, and designer. Although, Picasso had been earlier inspired by other art styles like impressionism and post-impressionism, he was highly motivated by African art. His life and art style has often made scholars attempt a classification on his works. These include the Blue period (1901-1904) (Adams, 2001), the Rose (Circus) period (1904-1905) and the Negro period (1906-1907) (Encarta,2009). Recently, a fourth period had been added to these three. However, our concern is on the Negro period when Picasso discovered the power of African abstract masks. In 1906, when Picasso and Matisse met, both artist were excited about African art.

The work in question, titled “les Demoiselles d’ Avignon” featuring five women in a brothel, demonstrates his excitement (**fig.2**).

This work is regarded as the harbinger of cubism. It highlights Picasso’s attempt to shatter every law of perspective, using the African anatomy. Picasso in his own capacity, was able to merge, Egyptian, Western and pure African traits into a holistic pictorial expression. The two African figures in the painting, look like human masks, particularly their facial features. What was of immense interest was his ability to create an impossible pose out of his pictorial tableau. He also attempts the disintegration of both the fore and background simultaneously to create a cubic feel. Emphasis was more on

form, less on colour. The geometric characteristic of African art was injected in all the five female figures making them appear cubic in nature.

The first and major Germany expressionist contribution which stemmed from Dresden was “Die Brücke”. It was founded in 1905 and was dissolved in 1913(Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001). One of its major influences is derived from oceanic art. The movement consisted of initially four members and gradually included others before its eventual break-up. Emil Nolde (1867-1956) was a member of the group.

Some of the influences of his works were derived from Russia, the Far East and the South seas (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001).

His work on the last supper (**fig.3**) shows his rejection of pictorial refinement in favour of primeval expressions which was inspired by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Paul Gauguin was a post impressionist artist who incorporated Tahiti influences into his works(Janson,1986).

### **Discussion and Results**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of primitivism in the art works of three Western artist of the Twentieth Century. The outcome showed that traditional African and Oceanic artistic- influences did make major inroads in the works of quite a number of artists in Europe. Although three artist of Western origin was used for this study, the result showed that most of the artists in this period were influenced by these primitive styles particularly from their masks and wood figures. The reason stemmed from the in-flock of works from those cultures in the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century into the West. Thus, Western culture, saw increased interests in these so-called primitive art forms and also because Western artist were tired of five centuries of the renaissance style. The result was the gradual appreciation and application of African and Oceanic art styles, thus affecting the quality of western art. This finding shows how the twentieth century brought enlightenment of some sort into the West through art objects from other cultures and how this in turn influenced their art styles and movements tremendously.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is indeed obvious, that “traditionality” not the so-called “primitivism” greatly influenced the twentieth century Western art style. It created a fertile ground for the intergration of artist in the early and

latter half of the twentieth century which brought about the dynamism evident in Western art today. From the so-called static characteristics of African, Oceanic and American culture arose, expressionism in its fullest ramification in the west. It was as a result of this artistic interaction of forms that the artist became aware of the need to broaden their knowledge using styles from other cultures. They began to look inwards innovating and creating newer concepts. They craved for ideas from other continents and lands which was systematically intertwined into their styles. These attributes gave rise to art styles like fauvism, cubism, Die brücke, futurism, and many others. It led to the evolution of Western art which appeared static since the fifteenth century. It also exposed them to the fact that we all live in a global village where concepts and ideas can be shared. And that all cultures should be appreciated no matter the level or speed of development.

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**Fig 1.** Henri Matisse, *Harmony in Red*, 1908-09. Oil on canvas (1.8 x 2.4 cm) state Hermitage Museum St Petersburg. Courtesy of Laurie Schneider Adams *A History of Western Art*, 2001.



**Fig 2.** Pablo Picasso's *les Demoiselles d' Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas museum of modern art New York. Courtesy of Laurie Schneider Adams *A History of Western Art*, 2001.



**Fig 3.** Emil Nolde. *The last supper* 1909 Neukirchen (Schleswig) Germany courtesy of H.L. Janson, *History of Art* 1986