

Borrowing Culture:

The Appropriateness of Picasso's Use of the Mbangou Mask in 'Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)'

Extended Essay

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Abstract

When art is borrowed from another culture is its symbolic value modified or maintained? Are there damages to the cultural value of the art in question? Or can the holistic effect be more beneficial? This essay attempts to examine the appropriateness and effect of borrowing another culture's art. In considering Pablo Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger', the essay attempts to evaluate the appropriate use by Pablo Picasso of some of the formal features of the Mbangú mask.

As a result the essay will examine the historical context of 'Les Femmes d'Alger' and Cubism. This examination will be followed by a formal analysis of 'Les Femmes d'Alger' that will enable the reader to become familiar with the style and interpretation of Pablo Picasso's intentions. This will be followed by an introduction of the historical context of the Mbangú mask as well as a thorough examination of the formal features of the mask. This analysis will enable the reader to see some of the features of the Mbangú mask in 'Les Femmes d'Alger'. In presenting an examination of the formal qualities that unite both the Mbangú Mask to 'Les Femmes d'Alger' the essay establishes a point of comparison between both pieces. It will reveal how Picasso has appropriated some of the features of the Mbangú mask and provide insight into the appropriate use or improper use of the Mbangú mask.

Introduction

The art of today was born to the events of yesterday. Much of that liberty to create, that liberty to visualize comes from the fact that many cultures were 'opened' to the concept of globalization, the idea of 'sharing' and 'borrowing'. The word 'modern' often used to describe the art of revolutionary movements such as the Cubist movement inspired by Pablo Picasso, was influenced by Cezanne's work and other abstract art especially the formal features of African art (Chapman 108).

The union of the 'primitive' art of Africa and other abstract art forms with the modern concepts of Europe, have enabled Western art to evolve from the superficial appreciation of beauty and perfection into a '...powerful emotional medium....' (Penrose 27). The dissatisfaction of artists such as Picasso, Matisse, and Braque with the academic formulas of Western Art has led to the borrowing of artifacts and techniques of the African arts and other art forms in search of a medium allowing them to reconnect with the human soul, and emotions. The spiritual connection of art to the human soul was interesting to artist such as Picasso who sought for a means of re-defining art, and defying the limits of academic formulas, such as the Golden ratio.

In reconnecting art to the human soul Picasso in 'Les Femmes d'Alger', 'borrows' from the Zaire Mbangou Mask of the Pende Tribe in search of the power of abstract art as a visual means of communicating. But can the act of borrowing be called so, if the symbolic use and significance of that art form is not expressed? In juxtaposing the 'primitive' formal features of African art with western conceptual ideas, Picasso in "Les Femmes d'Alger" is able to re-captivate the 'magic purpose' and tremendous powers of primitive spirituality. However, in taking these art forms out of their social and environmental context Picasso encourages the decline and disintegration of its traditional uniqueness.

'Les Femmes d'Alger' (Pablo Picasso)

In 1907 Pablo Picasso painted 'Les Femmes d'Alger' a revolutionary painting that stood out as a turning point in his life '....the classical calm gave way to more expressive means of representing the human form which were not of the past but ...of the modern age....' (Penrose, 123) In painting 'Les Femmes d'Alger', Picasso moved his work towards the simplification of form under the influence of African sculptures, namely the Mbangou mask of the Pende tribe of Zaire. To Picasso, African art was symbolic of a 'savagery' that was the '...source of vitality and renewal that he wanted to incorporate for himself and European paintings...' (Les Femmes d'Alger 17) The art of the Renaissance to Picasso, Braque, and Matisse had become the idolization of perfection and the growing obsession of perspective and details and what Picasso sought was the freedom to reconstruct a concept that allowed the artist to express himself in new ways.

'All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by redskins, dusty manikins, Les Femmes d'Alger must have come to me that very day...' (Les Femmes d'Alger)

Picasso came across the African masks in a European museum. The unusual display and unusual art appeared to hold some symbolism to them that made them unique. To Picasso the masks were not simply sculptures; they carried within them a more profound meaning. 'They were magical objects...They were weapons. To help people stop being ruled by spirits to free themselves. Tools. If we give a form to those spirits we become free...' (Pablo Picasso) In the symbol of African sculpture, Picasso saw the necessity to appropriate the spirituality of African art to pass across a message of rebirth and introduce the concepts of cubism. Cubism is the deconstruction of an image to create a new rearranged picture to

include various perspectives. This form is often referred to as the art of dynamic liberation and an example of such is 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (Chapman 108).

Analysis of "Les Femmes d'Alger" (O. J. No. 111)



Figure 1: Pablo Picasso « Les Femmes d'Alger » 1907. Oil on canvas, 8' x 7' 8" (243.9 x 233.7 cm)

"Les Femmes d'Alger." www.moma.org. 2003. Museum of Modern Art. 12 Feb. 2007.
<<http://www.moma.org/collection/conservation/demoselles/index.html>>.

In 'Les Femmes d'Alger' Picasso painted the image of five young women, each striking a pose that revealed their very muscular and exaggerated proportions as well as their masculine body. The five figures (positive shapes) are intertwined in the (negative shapes) curtains that make up the background. The geometric shapes of the curtains are outlined by the black thin and thick lines found at varying locations across the canvas that emphasize the merge of the figure with the background. The paths of movements in the curtain are emphasized with the lines that make more evident the flow in the curtains. The 'waves' of the curtains are broken by lines into geometric shapes of various sizes that accentuate and compliment the masculine forms of the women in the same manner that certain features of the mask such as the raffia accentuate male features.

The sensory qualities highlight the muscular figures as well as the abstraction of form. The color palette used by Picasso are of a 'flesh tone', earthly colors and shades of ochre, the light value and the complementary of blue, white and its complement. The 'flesh tone' pink is a light value of red. However the intensity of each shade within the figure differs, for

example the figures on the left are painted with flat surfaces of pink only a slight variation of tone (Penrose, 128). On the face of the figure on the extreme left, Picasso uses the complement of beige as well as the dark values of black and gray to decrease and saturate the skin complexion. The second figure's skin tone is of a very soft and local color with only a little variation of tone. The third figure shares that softness in complexion with the other two figures on the left. The last two figures contrast sharply in color value to the others. The fourth figure standing and the figure squatting has a mixture of light values and dark values of the 'flesh tone' pink. Their facial feature as a result of the rough brushstrokes and the dark values of complimentary green, red blue and black accentuates a certain savagery, and crudity. The same crudity with which Picasso paints the exaggerated features are the same on the negative shapes. The brushstrokes are harsh where Picasso applies white, and softer brush strokes where the blue hue and is complimentary is applied.

'Les Femmes d'Alger is a 'figurative composition of five nudes grouped around a still life in the foreground....the violently dislocated features and bodies of the other two have all the barbaric qualities of primitive art.'(Les Femmes d'Alger)

The informal balance of 'Les Femmes d'Alger' dominates the painting. The three figures on the left often referred to as a symbol of ancestry of Iberian bronzes and Catalan murals with which Egyptian influences have been assimilated are lacking '...in conventional grace, they are poised and serene...' (Penrose, 125) this sharply contrasts with the two figures on the right who placed one above the other with their monster like faces, and the absence of grace in their postures. The figure above the other makes a niche for herself in the curtains, while the squatting figure below is opened out, twists on her haunches showing a face with staring blue eyes (Penrose 131). Both have faces like masks which seem foreign to their naked bodies.(Penrose, 132) The right side of the painting becomes 'heavy' as a result of

the dominating use of the cool and warm colors blue, red and green on the faces, as well as the black outlines the essential shapes (Penrose, 128).

The informal balance of the piece enables Picasso to accentuate disunity between what art is and what it was perceived to be. The concepts of idealism and perfection reflected what society strived to be, not what it was as a result this revelation comes across as an attack. Picasso uses the formal features of the mask to carry out this attack. The imbalance of the painting contradicts the harmonious unity of two opposite (black and white) of the Mbangu Mask. As a result the Mbangu mask's concept of balance and unity is invalidated. However, not all formal features were misappropriated, the universal association of 'darkness' to misfortune is one common element shared.

The use of the significance of the black pigments of the Mbangu mask in Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)' highlights the crude realities of his world by exposing the muscular figures through the abstraction of the idealization of form and by emphasizing on the crudity and lack of 'conventional' grace through the grotesque distortion of the figures. Similarly in the juxtaposition of the good and the bad, sickness and the health in the mask, Picasso contrasts his more graceful Iberian figure to the more 'savage' and animal like figures.

A more contemporary view of art would describe Picasso's creation as a true representation of the global society today, the evolution of society into the greater appreciation of the human mind, emotion and soul. Picasso in his painting invites the viewer to respond emotively. The thought provoking shock of the viewer forces the reader to respond with his or her emotion.

'.....the classical calm gave way to more expressive means of representing the human form which were not of the past butof the modern age....' (Penrose, 123)

Picasso exaggerates features such as the width of their arms, the legs particularly their calves muscles, the foot and distorts the width of their waists making them thin to emphasize the angular curve of their waistline. The geometric exaggerations of the human proportions contradict the idea of the perfect human body through the radical simplification of form and allow Picasso to defy the academic formulas of the golden ratio. The exaggeration in the human features of the Mbangou mask is symbol of the force of spirituality. The exaggerated features of the mask successfully establish a connection between what it symbolizes and what the viewer interprets it to be, this powerful representation of the ancestral spirit world. Picasso's painting has an opposite effect; it distances the viewers of the early twentieth century, who expect to see the human feature in perfect symmetry, but are met with the radical simplification of form and little movement.

The Mbangou Mask of Zaire



Figure 2: Mbangou Mask of the Tribe of Zaire «Treasure of the month." The Pende African Museum. 2006. African Museum. 12 Feb. 2007
<<http://www.africamuseum.be/museum/treasures/Mbangou>>.

The Mbangou mask presently in the Central Royal museum in Central Africa is used by the sedentary farming cultures which have a much more permanent and long lived tradition of sculptures and mask. The art of the sedentary farming cultures is very precious because in parts of Africa the record of artwork is incomplete. Most have been destroyed by the damp environment or by wood-eating insects. As a result surviving artwork such as the Mbangou mask of Zaire enables the study of the tribe from which it originated from.

Masks of Africa are a reflection of the culture. Its abstract features are representative of this absence of place, because the people of the African sedentary farming cultures and others believe that the human body had to homes, the spirit world and the physical world. As a result, the mask of the Pende tribe reflects such beliefs, through its symbolic embodiment of the spiritual forces and the spiritual world, uniting the Pende tribe in a harmonious whole with the...universe, thus uniting the clan with the ancestors.”(Brommer, 124)The mask connected the people to their past, and guided them spiritually through their future. This connection to the ‘invisible’ spirits fortified their traditions and made them ‘eternal; to the Pende Tribe.

Analysis of the Mbangou Mask

The Mbangou mask is made entirely of wood, raffia, 'vegetales' plants and cloth material. Its proportion as well as the assemblage of stylized geometric and 'naturalistic' shapes '...represents a recognizable human face.' (Brommer, 126) However its monumental proportions as it stands a 108 centimeters tall affects the accuracy to which the mask may resemble a well proportioned 'human face', and emphasizes the distorted and exaggerated features of the mask, that do not portray the perfect and accurate proportions of the Golden ratio. The eyes on an average human face are halfway between the top of the head and the chin, but on the Mbangou mask they are about 30.7% percent which is approximately 1.3 between the top of the head and chin. The same exaggeration is seen with the nose which is about 75 % between the eyes and chin, this means above the average nose which is about halfway between the eyes and the chin.

More exaggerated features can be seen with the placement of the ears which are to be parallel to the eyebrows and the bottom of the nose, however the ears of the Mbangou mask is only equal to the length of the eyes and not parallel to the eyebrows and the bottom of the nose. Similarly the mouth is distorted horizontally instead of vertically which means that it does not extend in a line directly under the side of each eye. As a result the exaggerated human features enable the sculpture to incorporate the idea of the spirit world, a world beyond the physical realities of our world.

The mask has patterns; lines and texture that help render visible certain features attributed to the male, such as the beard and the hair. On what appears to represent the beard the sculptor used raffia to tie, long thin 'fibers' of plant creating a repetitive pattern of lines. The repeated use of raffia to create an interlocking pattern that runs across the edge of the

mask creating a rough texture, barely recognizable because of the miniature size of the interlocking. This patterned use of raffia forms a borderline. On the surface of the mask the same roughness is applied, but with more visibility and sharpness. That very angular rough marks, though seemingly unintentional on the part of the sculptor are very visible particularly once light penetrates the black side of the mask, thus creating some form of movement which roams aimlessly across the mask.

The Mbangou mask is the opposition of black versus white. This opposition of the light value (high-keyed) of white to the darkest value (low-keyed) of black contrasts sharply, and 'bisects' the face, separating it into two distinct entities. The white is symbolic of the spirits of the dead and represents the hope of being cured of illness whereas the black pigment stands for the sicknesses and illnesses that ravage the body. Black in the Pende Tribe symbolizes an offense, it is believed that disease can be brought about by an act of offending spirits of ancestors and is often viewed as a punishment. The conceptual symbolism of black can be related to the Asian concepts of the ying-yang, with all good things comes its opposite. Black is like the venom of the soul, the destructive element. Thus the black representing disease is used to caution against 'destructive' behavior, and to teach the Pende audience about the reward of good behavior. As a result with the use of black versus white the sculptor attempts to create a three dimensional symmetrically balanced mask. The visual weights on each side of the central axis are balanced thus emphasizing stability in the universe.

These formal features are deeply rooted in nature. The idea of sickness and well being is effectively communicated through the juxtaposition of black and white each having its own connotations, black symbolizing darkness and 'sickness' and white the hope of being well cured. The two distinct features are united to create this balanced image. The Mbangou mask is recognized by the opposition of black and white that bisects the face and the distortions. The white is symbolic of hope of being cured of illness and the black pigment stands for the

sickness and illness that ravages the body throughout life. The mask is symbolic and embodies spiritual forces, uniting the Pende tribe in a harmonious whole with their world and the world of their ancestors (Brommer, 124). The mask connected the people to their past, and guided them spiritually through their future. This connection to the 'invisible' spirits fortified their traditions and made them 'eternal' to the Pende Tribe. However, the concept of eternity in the mask only survives if the symbolism that connects it to the 'spirit world' is respected and maintained.

Arguments supportive or against Picasso's use of the Mbangou Mask

Picasso saw the necessity to use formal qualities to revolutionize western art, by incorporating the intensity of human emotions. Yet, though the concept of cubism was influenced by African art, in 'borrowing' the formal qualities of the Mbangou mask, Picasso does not employ or take into consideration its symbolic meaning. In presenting the women in such a crude and disrespectful manner Picasso insults the value of the woman in the Pende Tribe of Zaire. However, 'Les Femmes d'Alger' was a statement against regulations that defined art as the idealization '...of objects or people in a stylized and perfect way...' (Brommer, 606) This statement against the idealization of objects and man is visually portrayed with the idea of deformity. The power that Picasso is able to bring into this piece as a result of the merge of the African formal features gives the piece a sense of eternal in that the modern concepts of the simplification of form of the early 1900s are still applicable to art today.

Though visually both the mask and the painting are empowered with thought provoking elements such as the contrasts, the concepts differ. The African mask promotes a greater understanding of the African culture, extending the viewers sense of the real world to include the myths and magic of the spirit world. Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger' on the other hand dismisses the concepts of perfection and beauty replacing them with the idea a raw reflection of the western society. Thus, in adapting the formal features of the Mbangou mask, Picasso redefines them as a result separating the formal features of the Mbangou mask from the African ideological concept of sickness and well being.

"...a bid to recapture kinds of representational 'power' that the arts of civilized, enlightened Europe had lost" (Green, 93)

Though the power of primitive art applied to the western concept results in the development of a more global art, this approach does not promote a greater cultural appreciation of the Pende Tribe. Picasso paints the women without grace, or self esteem, grotesquely poised in an 'overt sexual display' (Pablo Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger'). Picasso's painting is an offense to the Pende tribe in which women play the important and respectable role of being the financial solicitors of the home as well as the family caretaker. The woman of the Pende Tribe of Zaire, do the majorities of the farm work and are responsible for selling goods in the market. The Pende's are a matrilineal people, meaning the eldest and most respectable members of society are from the maternal side of the family. Given the importance attached to the women in her home and society, Picasso's painting of women without charm, humility, and grace and in such a barbaric manner can be perceived as an insult to the integral and integrity of the women's role in her society.

In presenting women in such a shocking insulting and violent manner it is fair to conclude that despite the similarities in their artistic and geometric, simplifications and distortions, Picasso, in borrowing the Mbangu mask, failed to consider the society from which the mask came from and was not cautious enough to avoid offending its culture and ethics. In doing this Picasso takes the Mbangu mask out of its environmental and social context as a result promotes a colonist attitude to the African culture. The suppression of a culture for the promotion of a new ideological concept, this attitude is the reasons why today African arts to people of African descent have little cultural and sentimental value. The rapid death of the African culture began with the colonist mindset, and continues today with the rampant growth of globalization. Even though adapting the Pende idea would have been a sign of respect to its origin, had Picasso incorporated the Pende tribal beliefs in his piece then the concept and intention of his piece would have lost its identity. The Pende promote the respect of the woman but in Picasso's painting in portraying the woman in such a grotesque

way he reveals the crude reality that can only be done by portraying the women in such a violent way.

However, in analyzing the morals, beliefs and teachings behind the creation of the Mbangu mask, it is possible that Picasso in painting 'Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)' consciously or subconsciously adopted the ideology of the Mbangu mask.

"...these sculpture of painted wood...posses a good natured ferocity and a murderous innocence which commends respect." (Green, 76)

The Mbangu mask is believed to be the representation of a highly regarded hunter who had been stricken with facial paralysis. The morals behind the hunter's tale demonstrates how even the most esteemed and upright member of the community can be afflicted with sickness. In this case it is believed that the individual was a victim of sorcery, bewitched by a rival or circumstance that inflicted him with a disease. The mask therefore teaches that the Pende audience should be aware of the rewards of good behavior and those who did not hold on to religious and good natured values and were morally flawed. Thus the mask speaks of following the right path in the same manner that Picasso speaks of bringing back to life or to 'health' the true essence of art. In the same way that the Mbangu mask speaks of paralyses, Picasso address paralyses in his painting with the crude distortions and abstraction of the figure Picasso expresses his distaste for the stereotypical idealization of form. From his perspective art was beyond this focus on beauty that 'paralyzed' its growth. This further emphasized by the sharp contrast between the Iberian figures and the 'savage' figures.

"...men had made those masks for sacred purposes, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surround them in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment, I realized that was what painting was all about. Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of

magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.” (Gilet, 75)

To Picasso this perception of art as an aesthetic operation, an appreciation of perfect proportion was what he was revolting against. (Remember that the black pigment stands for the sickness and illnesses that ravage the body.) To Picasso, art within itself was ‘sick’ and this obsession of beauty during post-Renaissance and Renaissance eras was ravaging through the soul of art and what it stood for and what it meant. It is as a result of his awareness of this obsession of beauty within the art community and society that Picasso turns towards African sculpture in search of some raw connection with reality and spirituality. Thus he wanted to show Europe through ‘...the tremendous powers of primitive spirituality’, by commending the respect of his fellow artists. Art was to represent something greater than just a myth of feminine beauty, greater than the appearance of calm and harmony of the early Renaissance, the lesson to all artists was that beauty was insufficient, art was to spring from within, from a primitive or raw need to express human feelings towards the world around in an emotional manner. Thus despite the crude, brutal and insulting depiction of women, Picasso unconsciously or consciously respected the significant meaning of the Mbangou mask and the values of the tribe by adapting the lesson of ‘sickness’ to art. It is this ‘ferocious’ expression of the sculpture that Picasso adopted to call attention to what art had become, it was his revolution against the ‘dark’ reality of art prior to the Cubist movement. Picasso through his violent approach was to redefine art as the interaction between structure and movement, between shapes and its negative space. Thus Picasso’s ‘primitivising style...aspires like the African Sculpture he so admired, to an act not of mere decoration, but of power...’ (Green, 93) his attempt was for art to become the ‘dynamic liberation’ from all ‘static categories’ and norms.

Conclusion

Though Picasso, took the Mbangou mask in taking out of its social and environmental context, encourages the adaptation of that form to his concept allows him to draw the viewer to the piece. In his attempt to re-captivate the 'magical purpose' and power of primitive art, Picasso successfully transcends the boundaries of the 'superficial' appreciation of beauty and perfection of the Renaissance Era. As a result 'Les Femmes d'Alger' becomes a revolutionary piece that has enabled art to grow into an expressive and modern means of portraying the human form.

However, in taking the mask out of its social context, Picasso adopts a colonist attitude to African art. As an African affected by European ideologies that stemmed from the colonist attitude, Picasso's use of the Mbangou mask diminishes the uniqueness of the mask. As our society progresses into this era of globalization it is important that each country's past remains unique. As a result of Picasso's use of formal features of the mask, the Mbangou mask is no longer unique. Its symbolic meaning has been replaced.

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