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136 Fauve Masks: Rethinking Modern "Primitivist" Uses of African and Oceanic Art, 1905–8

JOSHUA I. COHEN

Fauve painters "discovered" African and Oceanic sculpture in 1905, when Vlaminck collected several wooden figures and a mask. Derain then studied Oceanic works in London, and Matisse struggled to paint a small figural statue he purchased in fall 1906. Fauve interests in shallow-relief, relatively naturalistic, and surface-ornamented sculptural objects suggest conformity with turn-of-the-century artistic and scientific ideas conflating heterogeneous strains of so-called primitive material culture. The dominant conceptual framework of "primitivism," however, has tended to limit art historical understandings of external formal influences on modernism, which can be gleaned by closely examining the particular objects the Fauves appropriated.

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As told in one of art history’s most widely reprised narratives, Paris-based avant-garde painters “discovered” African sculpture early in the twentieth century.¹ We see how this marked a major crossroads: it furthered a shift toward figural abstraction, sparked greater international appreciation of African artistic traditions, and eventually impacted the practices of modernists from the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere.² The chronology put forward in leading scholarship places the “discovery” in autumn 1906, when several artists of the loose-knit Fauve cohort—Henri Matisse and André Derain, followed by Maurice de Vlaminck—began studying African wooden masks and statues about six months prior to Pablo Picasso, who nevertheless became the key innovator.³ So well rehearsed are these circumstances that they appear thoroughly, even excessively, documented. Yet there remains some confusion around the particular steps by which the Fauves came to arrive at African art alongside Oceanic art, and with the concerns of Symbolism and Postimpressionism firmly in mind.⁴ Even if the Fauves’ initial engagement with “*art nègre*” (“black art,” as African and Oceanic arts were collectively called then) has ultimately been less influential than Picasso’s, it is worth investigating precisely for what it portended for Picasso and many others—or, in other words, for what it reveals of transitions between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European avant-garde approaches to non-Western material cultures.⁵

New archival and visual evidence indicates that Fauve interests in African and Oceanic art began approximately one year earlier than is commonly believed: in late summer or early fall of 1905, with acquisitions by Vlaminck, followed closely by Derain and Matisse in 1906. The aim in reevaluating this chronology is not to establish a clear progenitor—“as if,” art historian Jack Flam has written, “such a ‘discovery’ were analogous to the notion of priority that we commonly associate with scientific discovery.”⁶ Rather, looking afresh at this pivotal episode allows us to examine in greater detail the series of encounters and reactions that constituted Fauvism’s earliest engagement with so-called *art nègre*.

This reassessment also permits us to see how the scholarly discourse around “primitivism”—a conceptual framework that has long dominated the literature on modernist formal appropriations across cultural and colonial lines, among other topics—functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, critical commentaries on the cultural politics of “primitivism” have proven insightful in demonstrating how European artists’ practices and attitudes reflected colonialist perspectives, and the concept is art historically legitimate insofar as many turn-of-the-century artists in Europe indeed failed to note even basic cultural and geographic differences between diverse instantiations of “*art nègre*” or “*art primitif*,” lumping numerous artistic traditions together as one.⁷ On the other hand, where the goal is to parse and appreciate a diversity of extra-Western formal presences within modern art, “primitivism” remains an impoverishing lens, because it operates as a taxonomic catchall. It is a term that reinforces old classificatory orders rather than enabling new, detailed investigations of African and Oceanic works’ particular interventions within modernism.