

INTRODUCTION

IN APRIL 1972 THE GOVERNMENT of Senegal inaugurated an exhibition of art by Pablo Picasso at the Musée Dynamique near downtown Dakar (figure 1).¹ Only sparse visual documentation of the exhibition has survived, but the details of the exhibition ended up mattering less than did its catalytic function for reassessing, in Dakar, the direction and scope of *art nègre*—or “black art.”² By 1972 “black art,” a category with its own circuitous genealogy dating from the early twentieth century, had come to encompass canonical African sculpture as well as modern painting and sculpture by artists of African descent. The category’s critical reassessment took place mainly through a conference, “Picasso, Art Nègre, et Civilisation de l’Universel” (Picasso, black art, and civilization of the universal), organized in conjunction with the Dakar exhibition and featuring prominent artists and intellectuals from Senegal and France.³ At the conference, African sculpture held a pivotal place in discussions of Picasso’s practice, which, in turn, became a contested terrain where the stakes of African modernism were up for debate.



FIGURE 1

Pablo Picasso, exhibition poster, Musée Dynamique, Dakar, 1972, lithograph, 21½ × 30 in. Henri Deschamps Lithographie; printed by Mourlot, Paris. Private collection. Artwork © 2020 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Lyan'lex Bernales.

Given dominant scholarly characterizations of African modernist movements as territorially nationalist, anticolonialist, future-facing, and in many respects oppositional toward modernism in the West, it might seem infelicitous to focus on Africans and Europeans contemplating Picasso in postcolonial Dakar. A first impulse could even be to dismiss such an event as regressive and Eurocentric. But I contend that its implications are complex and far-reaching, because it suggests how some African modernists pursued an international artistic lineage and an indigenous cultural heritage simultaneously, and how worldly positioning lay at the core of their project. The Picasso exhibition, and especially the long history reexamined by its conference participants, offers a glimpse into the discourse and practice of African modern art. In line with the aims of this book, the exhibition and conference illuminate a phenomenon whose scope and objectives were in some ways more temporally expansive and more globally oriented than we have thus far understood.

One of the signal moves accompanying the 1972 exhibition, for example, was to cite Picasso as a producer of “black art,” and thus to appropriate Picasso for African modernism. That gesture, along with the idea for the exhibition, came from the first president of Senegal, the Negritude poet and theorist Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), who personally knew Picasso from previous decades spent living in Paris. Senghor took the occasion of the exhibition to both honor and revise Picasso’s legacy. In a speech delivered at the exhibition’s opening entitled “Picasso en nigrítie” (Picasso in blackness), Senghor named the Spanish artist as a model for his new state-funded cadre of painters and sculptors known as the *École de Dakar* (School of Dakar). As art historian Elizabeth Harney has incisively read him in this context, Senghor “co-opted a figure at the heart of the modernist movement, Pablo Picasso, using him as a model for *École de Dakar* artists.”⁴ What Senghor praised most explicitly in Picasso was his full integration of African “magic” into his practice: “new procedures and forms” facilitating a move away from Western classical conventions of “imitation” and toward the emotionally charged art of “invention,” rooted in stylization and abstraction.⁵

In keeping with his other writings from the 1930s onward, Senghor here relied on a dubious distinction between African emotional and Western rational approaches to art making.⁶ Yet as philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne has reminded us, this binary ultimately served Senghor’s mobilization of what Gayatri Spivak might call “strategic essentialism.”⁷ To wit: Senghor sought to dynamically use, rather than rigidly oppose, the status and momentum of established ideas that could be rerouted toward alternative ends. Instead of positioning Senegal in stark defiance of Europe and Western art, he capitalized on Picasso’s renown, and particularly on the Spanish artist’s well-known debts to African sculpture. The exhibition was, in the end, less about Picasso than it was about acknowledging Africa’s place within global modernity, and about positioning *École de Dakar* artists as heirs—and also rivals—to Picasso, with African “magic” similarly animating their “procedures and forms.”⁸

The crux of Senghor's intervention becomes more intelligible when read in dialogue with his interlocutors in 1972, and especially with the French art historian Pierre Daix, who argued at the conference, as he had previously, that Picasso first encountered African sculpture only *after* completing his masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907; figure 27) and that Cubism owed itself wholly to the "intellectual courage" of Picasso and his collaborator Georges Braque.⁹ The stubbornness of such thinking helps clarify Senghor's motivation in venerating African sculpture by way of Picasso. It also elucidates the perspective of Senegal's minister of culture, Alioune Sène, who stated in his opening remarks to the conference that Picasso's debts to Africa "had the character of a cross-fertilization on the highest plane, and the value of a component in the evolutionary process of *world art*."¹⁰ Sène's shrewd statement held that it was Africa that had helped Europe to evolve, and not the other way around. In yet another conference talk, the Senegalese painter Papa Ibra Tall (1935–2015), a luminary of the École de Dakar, qualified Picasso's "discovery" of African art more cautiously as an aberrant "first good step" that broke with a long and sordid history of aggressions perpetrated by Europeans. Tall saliently defined "black" culture not in terms of heredity but as a function and manifestation of shared resistance to racism and oppression.¹¹

In these and other exchanges to be explored in what follows, "black art" stands as a central rubric that was taken up most significantly by African and African American writers and artists. At its best, the term generated dialogue and forged a sense of community across geographical distances, cultural differences, and historical moments. The scope of "black art" was broad enough to include Picasso, European modernism, and world art, even as it invoked unity across Africa and the diaspora through common artistic and political ambitions. The haziness and racial inflection of "black art" perhaps constitute its glaring deficiency, as examined in retrospect, but also its partial source of strength at the height of its deployment. As this book will explore, the term's versatility made it an effective framing apparatus that African and diaspora modernists would wield to confront prejudices while also amplifying the force and range of their own alliances across time and space.

Tracking visual and rhetorical mobilizations of "black art," this book adumbrates a twentieth-century history of modernist engagements with African sculpture that developed in fits and starts and in various permutations beginning around 1905. Before that time, as early as the 1870s and '80s, wooden masks and statues had started to reach Europe from Africa in increasing numbers, at a moment when European trading and exploration in West and Central Africa were building toward state-sponsored colonization. European organizers of universal expositions, ethnographic museums, and other public displays during this period standardly reviled African objects as vulgar curios justifying "civilizing" colonial missions on the continent. The Parisian art world accordingly took little notice of such objects until a small circle of painters,

initially limited to the Fauves and Picasso, began acquiring and studying a select few African and Oceanic sculptural works, which they called *art nègre* and tended to consider as “primitive.” Over time, this burgeoning interest yielded innovations of figural abstraction in avant-garde painting and new conceptions of volume, assembly, and viable materials in avant-garde sculpture. By the 1920s, *art nègre* connoted all things modern and “African,” or “black,” and was widely in vogue across Europe, including in literature, design, performance, and popular culture. *Art nègre* also expanded as a category during this period to include modernist production by Africans and African Americans.

The cultural reversal effected between 1905 and the 1920s marked a paradigm shift of extraordinary significance. The shift first took place through an alchemical reaction between “black” sculpture and the creative responses of the Paris-based avant-gardes. In the longer term, it gained lasting importance only when Afro-modernists came also to regard African sculpture as foundational. Starting in the mid-1920s, the African American philosopher and art critic Alain Locke (1885–1954), an influential figure of the Harlem Renaissance who traveled frequently to Paris, urged an emergent generation of “New Negro” artists to draw inspiration from African canonical sculpture. Among the first wave of modern visual artists from Africa was the sculptor and painter Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002), who embraced canonical sculpture and modernism together in Cape Town in 1936, precipitating his move to Paris in 1938. For Locke, Mancoba, and others to follow, the European “discovery” of African art was important because it signaled a potential for black creative achievement to be valued at the highest levels of status and remuneration. From the 1920s onward, artists and intellectuals from diverse backgrounds—including African Americans, citizens and subjects from French colonial territories in Africa and the Caribbean, and others from regions of Africa not controlled by France—gravitated toward Paris as a cosmopolitan space offering new platforms for creative expression, and perhaps greater degrees of personal and political freedom than could be found elsewhere.

Paris in the 1920s and ’30s thus witnessed a burgeoning of black activism, critical discourse, and artistic production that disrupted long-standing conventions of Western cultural exclusivity. Negritude—the best-known focal point of the Francophone Afro-diasporic intelligentsia during this period—was indeed a prominent but by no means a solitary or monolithic formation. As a loosely conceived movement, Negritude drew ideas and participants from several communities in Paris, as well as from transnational and transatlantic currents associated with pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, and Surrealism and ethnology. From this point forward, “black art” was retooled to meet new political, iconographic, and formal imperatives. What had originated among early twentieth-century Europeans as an awkward designation of pejorative praise became a calculated framework that allowed mid-twentieth-century African and African diaspora modernists to assert global belonging and cultural distinctiveness all at once.

Toward the late 1950s and early '60s, as formerly colonized peoples won independence across sub-Saharan Africa, modernist art practices gathered support from new national governments. Including in Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, some of the continent's artists and writers remained closely in dialogue with Francophone ideas, from Negritude's humanism, to the more radical critical theory of Frantz Fanon, to the internationalism and anticolonialism of the later Parisian avant-gardes. During the immediate postindependence period, no African head of state allocated more resources to cultural programs than Senghor in Senegal. A cofounder of Negritude in Paris before entering politics in 1945, Senghor had contributed preeminently to the recuperation of *art nègre*. In office in Senegal during the 1960s and '70s, he aimed to visually realize this ambition by founding the École de Dakar as a state-funded "school" of Senegalese modern art.

To understand twentieth-century engagements with African sculpture as part of a single (if somewhat disjointed) history of modernism, and to approach these engagements as a series of intermeshed rather than polarized episodes, is to pursue at least two frontiers of inquiry and argument. The first of these frontiers concerns the character of some of the earliest and most influential African sculptural objects to inspire the European avant-garde: a Fang mask from Gabon acquired by Maurice de Vlaminck in 1905 (figure 2); and a cylinder-eyed mask from Ivory Coast acquired by Picasso in 1912 (figures 44, 47, 51–53). On close scrutiny, it becomes clear that in terms of content, function, techniques, circulation, and use of imported materials, the makers of these masks responded to their immediate conditions of colonial modernity. Comprehending these masks' turn-of-the-century origins enables a revision of the assumption that African and other extra-Western arts served as little more than raw visual elements fueling modernism's appropriative machinery—a still-pervasive set of ideas that art historian Ming Tiampo has dubbed "cultural mercantilism."¹²

What can be noted instead is how trade and urbanization shaped coastal Africa well before the twentieth century, and how Europe's avant-garde "discovery" was itself unwittingly indebted to aspects of African modernity that were not necessarily dictated by colonial contact. Influential African sculptural works, in other words, reflected contemporary creativity and circumstances before reaching Europe. Putatively "primitive" works of art were, in fact, indisputably modern, inasmuch as they emerged from societies that were increasingly tied to an industrialized global economy, at a time when the accelerating rate of technological and other forms of change gave rise to greater degrees of geographic mobility, cultural mixing, and multilayered identity formation. Viewed in this way, African-European exchanges in twentieth-century art had their beginnings not in the hands of European artists, as is commonly supposed, but rather among African sculptors working in the tumultuous and syncretic spaces that had long existed down Africa's Atlantic coast.

These transcontinental perspectives begin to shed critical light on “primitivism”: a concept that for decades has dominated studies of colonial-era cultural appropriation. Under scrutiny, “primitivism” comes to appear conspicuously limited, for its concerns rarely exceed the confines of a Western vantage point. At once a tacit endorsement of so-called primitive art and a privileging of “primitivists,” the concept mainly coheres for the purposes of rehearsing Western exoticism and Western art history. While these remain valid topics, “primitivism” delimits its subject matter as their exclusive purview, under the pretext of historical accuracy. Of course it would be foolish to suggest that turn-of-the-century European artists claimed any real awareness of the prior circumstances of the African objects they studied. Yet to lump those influential objects in with all manner of other non-Western artistic traditions, and to barricade those works inside a space cordoned off from modernity, is to adopt a Eurocentric perspective as a sole point of reference. By contrast, elaborating a multisited history of modernism means taking seriously the modern *African* contexts of African sculptural objects, including in instances where those objects circulated widely. To probe the “African side” of the encounter in this way, always on a case-by-case basis, is to resituate the “discovery” within a fraught zone of interface between roughly contemporaneous—if culturally and politically heterogeneous and divergent—modes of production. It is to recognize how local responses to colonial modernity informed particular sculptural works that, in turn, added to the international development of twentieth-century art.

A second frontier of inquiry and argument, covering a wider historical expanse and requiring correspondingly more qualifications to elaborate, concerns the relationship between Europe’s avant-garde “discovery” (examined in chapters 1 and 2) and the rise of black modernisms from roughly the 1920s through the 1970s (explored in chapters 3, 4, and 5). There is no question that the early twentieth-century “discovery” took place at a moment when empires reigned and colonial ideologies held sway. In recent decades, scholars inspired by postcolonial studies have analyzed how Western racism and colonial doctrines—often accompanied by misogyny and other politically sanctioned engines of dehumanization—drove modern “primitivist” practices as early as the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the more one gathers of this period, the more one becomes aware of a whole spectrum of players who populated the imperial landscape. If European “primitivists” do not automatically belong in the same camp with the legions of disreputable actors—boosters, apologists, administrators, mercenaries—employed under colonial regimes, then it is partly because some of these avant-garde artists were “operating,” as art historian Patricia Leighten has memorably argued, “both within the French popular image of the ‘dark continent’ and in an anti-colonialist milieu.”¹³

A more mundane but also a more salient reason for adjusting our view of the “discovery” is that, prior to around 1905, very few Westerners had considered so-called

African idols and fetishes as *art*—much less as radically inventive forms of art that would shake the Western canon to its foundations. What the Fauves and Picasso set in motion was not only a series of formal advances but also a wider interest in African art among art collectors, critics, dealers, curators, and the general public in Europe and North America. For early promoters of so-called *art nègre*, a common tactic was to insist, as did the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire in 1909, provocatively for the period, that “[t]he Louvre should welcome certain exotic masterpieces that are no less moving than the beautiful examples of Western statuary.”¹⁴ Apollinaire further lobbied for the founding of “a great museum for exotic art, corresponding to what the Louvre is for European art,” that “would soon become one of civilization’s most useful monuments.”¹⁵ As self-serving and problematic as such universalizing narratives undoubtedly were, they nevertheless reflected a basic—and, paralleling colonialism, oftentimes half-hearted and hypocritical—rhetoric of inclusion that artists and intellectuals of African descent would soon come to interrogate and exploit.

It is well known that modern black expressive culture first reached Europe in the form of jazz, literature, and performance in the years directly following the First World War, when African American, Antillean, and African students, workers, and ex-servicemen converged on Paris in record numbers. The earlier avant-garde “discovery” of African sculpture can be understood as an important backdrop to these developments. To schematize for the sake of concision: the “discovery” of African art gave rise to Cubism and then to a more popular *vogue nègre*, which would become trademarks of Parisian cultural life in the 1910s and ’20s. A pivotal question is how black writers and artists of the period viewed connections between white and black avant-gardes. Jeanne “Jane” Nardal (1902–1993), a Martinican student and critic who was based in Paris in the 1920s, observed the following in her famous essay “L’Internationalisme noir” (Black internationalism; 1928):

Then came war, dislocation, blacks from every origin coming together in Europe, the sufferings of the war, the similar infelicities of the postwar period. Then snobs—whom we must thank here—and artists launched Negro art. They taught many blacks, who themselves were surprised, that there existed in Africa an absolutely original black literature and sculpture, that in America poetry and sublime songs, “the Spirituals,” had been composed by wretched black slaves. Successively revealed to the white world as well as the black was the plasticity of black bodies in their sculptural attitudes, giving way without transition to an undulation, or to a sudden slackening, under the rule of rhythm, the sovereign master of their bodies; in this black face, so mysterious to whites, the artist would discover tones so shifting and expressions so fleeting as to make either his joy or his despair; the cinema, the theater, the music hall opened their doors to the conquering blacks.

All these reasons—from the most important to the most futile—must be taken into account to explain the birth among Negroes of a race spirit. Henceforth there would be

some interest, some originality, some pride in being Negro, in turning back toward Africa, the cradle of Negroes, in remembering a common origin. The Negro would perhaps have his part to play in the concert of the races, where until now, weak and intimidated, he has kept quiet.¹⁶

Nardal's chronology is slightly skewed: Europe's "launch" of *art nègre* actually predated the influx of black populations to Paris during and after the war. But she is more or less accurate in noting that "snobs . . . and artists" (read: European collectors, elite tastemakers, and avant-garde painters) did the launching. Apropos of Europe's intervention, we cannot miss Nardal's double gesture of antipathy ("snobs") and acknowledgment ("whom we must thank here"), any more than we can overlook the key place she reserves in her narrative for Africa as a focal point for an emergent diaspora consciousness: "the cradle of Negroes"; a place of "common origin." Alongside other expressive forms, African sculpture gave leverage to African and African diaspora modernists precisely because it had already reordered Western systems of taste and value, and seemed poised for greater triumphs. On a most basic level of analysis, what becomes clear in these exchanges is a serpentine trajectory through which the avant-garde "discovery," despite its well-known debts to empire, catalyzed social and creative processes that would eventually outstrip colonial logics.

Pioneering scholars of African modernism have not skirted or overlooked the thorny question of artists' relationships to Europe. An influential reading, articulated by the artist and art historian Olu Oguibe, holds that African modern artists took up easel painting "to invalidate European assumptions upon which the civilizing mission in the colonies was founded . . . to undermine the ideological foundations of the colonial project and overwrite, as it were, the colonial text."¹⁷ The first generation of black African painters—including Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), whose career began in Nigeria in the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as the South Africans John Koenakeefe Mohl (1903–1985) and Gerard Bhengu (1910–1990), who started working in the 1920s—did not all receive training in art academies, but they absorbed principles from Western academic art and, as Oguibe argues, they especially directed their talents toward illusionism as a means of demonstrating a level of mastery that colonials insisted was unattainable for purportedly uncivilized "natives." As such, academicism in African painting joined forces with nascent anticolonial nationalist movements whose members demanded rights and autonomy by impugning supremacist justifications for European domination.

This early generation of academic painters, I will argue, did not wholly share strategies and circumstances with the African modernists, whose careers mostly began somewhat later. Whether or not one opts to endorse characterizations of the academicians as predominantly insurgent, ambivalent, or assimilationist, it seems necessary to

register, as artist and art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu has done, an important degree of agency among those early exponents of naturalistic painting who confidently broke with local tradition; asserted African rights to pursue specialized professions; displayed fluency in the colonizers' favored idiom; and expressed their cultural identities by portraying local subjects and scenes.¹⁸ A more general way of framing this overall point is to characterize power and resistance as relative factors that morph and adapt as a function of historical context, including through selected styles and modes of representation.

The same reasoning prevents us from overlooking the fact that many Francophone African and Antillean artists and intellectuals began to think critically in the 1920s and '30s about their own privileged status as *évolués*: educated, "evolved," or "assimilated" colonial citizens and subjects. Through these gradual awakenings, imposed hierarchies came to be counted among the most insidious dimensions of colonialism. As early as 1926–27, Lamine Senghor (1889–1927), a Senegalese activist and World War I veteran based in France, urged his francophone African and Antillean compatriots to identify voluntarily with *nègre*, the lowest in a three-rung ladder of French classifications for colonized peoples of African descent, below *noir* and *homme de couleur*.¹⁹ Senghor's statement constituted a "rallying cry" whose purpose was to build black solidarity in the face of racist divisions premised on assimilation to French culture.²⁰ Nearly thirty years later, another distinguished Senegalese intellectual, the writer and activist Alioune Diop (1910–1980), famously argued in a speech to the First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, held at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1956: "Colonization would be reduced to a few simple incidents without aftermath, if culture had not come in to give its lasting support to the work and designs of the soldier, the colonist and the politician; it is *culture* which is truly responsible for what is called 'the colonial situation.'"²¹

These examples, alongside many others that could be cited, reveal just how central, and pressing, cultural questions had become during the interwar period, and especially after 1945. Politicized African artists in these decades found it difficult to maintain integrity in an academic idiom endorsed by Europe's old guard, an idiom that could offer them a degree of parity by colonial standards but would allow giving voice to cultural identity only at the level of content. Although no neat progression can be sketched in the fitful rise of African modernism during the decades surrounding the Second World War, at least two defining features stand out: first, a search for an effective political orientation; and second and relatedly, the articulation of a new visual language. And the path these artists chose was increasingly modernist. (Indeed, it may be useful to seek out distinctions between, on the one hand, artists working in any style, medium, or format during the modern period; and on the other hand, artists of the same period who were also self-consciously modernists.)²² In the most basic sense of the idiom as taken up by African visual artists, modernism affirmed stylized figuration or full abstraction; the use of arbitrary bright colors; self-reflexivity; and dialogues

with modernist movements from elsewhere, partly through engagements with indigenous African visual traditions in textiles, script, painting, and perhaps most prominently, sculpture.²³

The basic logic behind this embrace of modernism is clear enough, even if the specific modalities and manifestations of African artists' practices were themselves heterogeneous and diffuse. To commit to modernism was to bypass the teachings of hallowed academies and orthodox practitioners, whether in African or European contexts. Often it was also to seek contact with governments, institutions, or communities that were working to overturn colonial doctrines that demanded either the wholesale Europeanization or else the ethnographic authentication of native life.²⁴ By embracing individualized freedom of expression and cosmopolitanism, African modernism tended, albeit sometimes obliquely and in contradictory fashion, to unmoor "tradition" from any neatly delimited regional or ethnic sphere. As early as the 1930s, modernism offered African artists (just as it had to African American artists beginning in the 1920s) opportunities to recover and reorganize the continent's material culture into a rich visual archive. Sometimes the appropriated material-cultural elements were living and local, and could be engaged with personally and directly. Just as often, however, they were accessed through photographic reproductions, museums, flea markets, and other recontextualizing venues. Artists thus adopted a formal language that was pan-African in actuality but that could be read as autochthonous, and that carried international legitimacy partly as a function of its familiarity to Western artists and tastemakers.

Modernist appropriations of African sculpture in this way became, if not truly global, then undoubtedly transcontinental and cross-cultural. As should be clear, my aim in what follows is not to trace the inception of African modernism to presumed proto-origins in Europe. Rather, it is to situate these movements in world-historical terms, by showing how European, African, and Afro-diasporic art practices were complexly interrelated and can be explored together via their shared engagements with canonical African sculpture. My contention is that Europe's "discovery" of African art, itself predicated on a nascent African modernity, achieved enduring significance mainly through its reverberations among African and African diaspora artists. These first generations of black modernists would come to write their own histories of modernism and African sculpture, while adding new layers of complexity to that larger story.

This book's chapters all orbit around asymmetrical instances of *exchange* involving Africa and Europe; indigenous art and modernist praxis; and three- and two-dimensional artistic mediums. My focus on exchange serves to resist common conceptualizations of modern versus "primitive," or Euro-American versus black modernisms, as both mutually reinforcing and mutually exclusive. I do, however, acknowledge that every approach comes with its own potential pitfalls. As musicologist William Anthony Sheppard has warned us: interdisciplinary "interloping ventures

... have long lost their glow of innocence.”²⁵ One key challenge for border-crossing scholarship, Sheppard suggests, lies in the question of “how to encourage identification of features that interrelate cultures and disciplines while acknowledging difference and expertise.”²⁶ It is one thing to propose to examine culturally disparate elements comparatively, and another to carry off the comparison. An unconventional scope needs to be carefully delineated and defended.

This book, in its basic outline, examines modernist appropriations of African sculpture in a two-stage historical trajectory that begins with an initial moment of “discovery” among the Fauves and Picasso (1905–12; chapters 1 and 2) and proceeds to encompass the rise and flourishing of black modernisms (1920s–1970s; chapters 3, 4, and 5). The latter development is handled by examining the strategies and outcomes of Alain Locke’s ideas in chapter 3; the artwork and experience of Ernest Mancoba in chapter 4; and the rhetorical and visual remaking of *art nègre* by Léopold Senghor and his collaborators in chapter 5.

Making no pretense to offer a comprehensive survey of African sculpture and modern art, the book investigates a series of key episodes that are purposely selected for their interconnections. As I argue, European avant-garde interests in African sculpture offered a basic model that endured even decades further on—one that practitioners from Africa and the diaspora would explicitly take up to simultaneously emulate and subvert. Locke and his associates, including Francophone intellectuals across the Atlantic such as Jane Nardal and Léopold Senghor, sought to fashion a new movement from the momentum of Europe’s *vogue nègre*. Black American painters during this period—Hale Woodruff, Malvin Gray Johnson, Palmer Hayden, Lois Mailou Jones, James Lesesne Wells, Norman Lewis—sifted through collections of African objects at the same time as they confronted the challenges of European modernism. Mancoba, for his part, discovered African sculpture in a library in Cape Town, in the pages of an illustrated book by a Paris art dealer. And Senghor, while living in France, elaborated a vision of art discourse and patronage that later culminated in the École de Dakar.

Those elements of European interest in African art that later surfaced most regularly among Afro-modernists did not, as it turned out, derive from the particular details of formal borrowings by Picasso and others. What ended up carrying more weight were the richly illustrated, often wildly generalizing books that were published in the wake of the “discovery” by prominent dealers, critics, and collectors. Of these books, the one that proved to have the longest life span, at least within the trajectory examined here, was *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926), officially authored by the Paris-based art dealer Paul Guillaume and the American educator Thomas Munro, but largely ghostwritten and financed by the Philadelphia-based collector Albert C. Barnes.²⁷ It was Barnes who brought Locke face-to-face with African art in the context of modernist collecting in 1924; whose African collection graced the pages of Locke’s *New Negro* anthology in reproduction in 1925; and whose ideas became influential even prior to their appearance in book form. Some years later, and across the Atlantic, *Prim-*

itive Negro Sculpture sparked Mancoba's interest in modernism and African sculpture in 1936, and centrally informed Senghor's thinking on *art nègre* beginning in 1939.

Notwithstanding the transatlantic production and circulation of modernist ideas about African art, the city of Paris, more than any other locale, served as a center of gravity for the art-historical trajectory that is considered in what follows. Paris was where European avant-garde artists first encountered and appropriated African sculptural objects, and where black modernists subsequently launched parallel appropriative practices. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Paris has anchored many groundbreaking scholarly studies of Afro-modernism and anti-imperialism during the interwar period.²⁸ As these studies have shown, Paris functioned as a nexus for black diasporic cultural life, especially after World War I, when new populations of black soldiers and workers came to the city from France's colonies and from the United States. By the 1920s, the French capital became an exceptionally productive space of encounter for African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American artists and intellectuals, among whom many also had contact with European avant-gardes. Building on the upheavals that grew out of Cubism, the Great War, and the arrival of jazz and other expressive forms, black artists were primed to establish themselves professionally and were largely celebrated by Parisian audiences. During the same period, Paris continued to be a major center for discourse and commerce related to African art. As both an art-world hub and a metropolitan capital for vast swathes of sculpture-producing Africa, Paris was where African art objects first became widely available to modern artists as a visual resource.²⁹

As concerns artistic media, this book is primarily about sculpture and painting, plus other two-dimensional forms such as drawing, printmaking, and tapestry. "Remember that a painting," wrote the French artist and critic Maurice Denis in 1890, "before being a battle horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote or another, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."³⁰ These parameters have hardly changed since Denis's pronouncement, notwithstanding the lofty ideals that later came to be associated with modernist flatness. As art critic Jed Perl has noted more recently: "Painting predicates an irrevocable fact—the plane of the canvas or panel on which the artist works—and then challenges that fundamental truth in an endless variety of ways."³¹

Prior to the twentieth century, Western painters sought to transcend the "irrevocable fact" of paint on canvas by crafting illusions of mass and spatial depth, and their counterparts in sculpture consistently corroborated this duty to illusionism. Exemplary sculptors reproduced the human figure realistically in the round, or else replicated the dynamics of two-dimensional representation through sculptural relief, or found solidity through integration with architecture. For Western artists, it seemed absolutely necessary to avoid what Adolph von Hildebrand, a prominent German sculptor and theoretician, had worried would lead to "an unfinished and *uncomfortable frame of mind* with regard to the three-dimensional or cubic nature of the impression" of a given object.³²

The “discovery” of African sculpture made usable and exciting, both to sculpture and painting, those challenging conditions of three-dimensionality that Hildebrand and others could only find nerve-racking. A more detailed account of this development is more challenging, however, because it lacks a neat progression in formal terms. The influence of African sculpture on modernism, I argue, manifested in remarkably varied ways. The Fauves were the first to collect and study African objects, starting in 1905, but they mostly held to late nineteenth-century emphases on clear lines, sculptural relief, and ornamental patterning. Fauve artists were arguably more attuned to Oceanic art (via Gauguin) than to African sculpture, but they appropriated works from both categories to advance an early revolution in figural painting. Picasso’s intervention was different because he came to revel in the “fact” of the canvas while simultaneously conceiving of a fractured and monumental new three-dimensionality, and he eventually also learned to exploit empty space in sculpture by making use of adhesives and component parts. American artists of the Harlem Renaissance continued with such varied approaches, ranging from Wells’s ultraflat woodblock prints to Woodruff’s interest in tensions between two- and three-dimensional elements. Mancoba subsequently took cues from African sculpture to produce his own stylized, directly carved figural sculptures and later developed a practice of further abstracting African masks and figures in drawings, paintings, and prints. By the 1960s, artists of the École de Dakar were again embracing strong lines and swathes of flat color to accommodate the technical requirements of designing wool tapestries.

Some readers may object that to attend to formal questions in the colonial and postcolonial contexts of “black art” is to risk embracing a myopic formalism. While acknowledging this potential critique, I submit that investigations of form are not necessarily bound to adhere to what art historian Ellen McBreen has described in reference to the controversial MoMA “*Primitivism*” exhibition (1984) as “approaches that . . . make claims for vague visual affinities between objects.”³³ Though it is a truism in art history that objects’ formal qualities reflect their social origins, this premise has somehow tended to escape consideration in association with “primitivism,” on grounds that the contexts of African objects must be irrelevant because they were unknown to the appropriating artists. I counter that the objects’ historical and social contexts must be relevant, because in attempting to translate African sculptural forms, modernists reacted indirectly to African sculptors’ particular preoccupations and values, which had given rise to those forms and were reflected in them.

Studies of interrelated forms and contexts likewise cast doubt on an odd convention of compartmentalization whereby European appropriations of African objects are theorized as instantiations of “primitivism,” while parallel phenomena among artists from Africa and the Americas get labeled as postcolonial reversals of the same practice, sometimes referred to as “nativism” or “indigenism.” In point of fact, African modernists, who made their homes in African urban centers and/or lived in European cities for extended periods, often had little if any more direct experience with African sculpture

than did their European counterparts. African and European modernists, then, despite their disparate backgrounds, typically approached African sculpture with comparable levels of unfamiliarity. Although some African painters had firsthand experiences with indigenous artistic practices, many others encountered African sculpture in museums, illustrated publications, and curio shops, just as European artists had done.

With these points in mind, African-informed compositions by different modernists stand to be explored together as sites of *décalage*—a French word that literary critic Brent Hayes Edwards has found germane for theorizing diaspora, whose generative disjunctions he pinpoints as “the trace or the residue . . . of what resists or escapes translation.”³⁴ Following Edwards, cultural fragmentation can be considered as bedrock for modernist appropriations of African art, where misapprehension and loss have been central to processes of translating African objects to artists’ own ends. In every case, appropriated objects contain elements “in the very weave of the culture . . . that cannot be dismissed or pulled out.”³⁵ My contention, following Edwards, is that the precise texture of these modernist (mis)translations requires careful decoding. By analyzing modern artists’ historical encounters with African sculpture via documentable lines of comparison and influence, the resultant work can be read as sites of cross-cultural discordance, and as signs of a productive if uneasy dialogue moving multidirectionally across continents.

The word *décalage*, sometimes employed in everyday French in reference to jet lag (*décalage horaire*), further illustrates the temporal dimension of this book, in the sense that modern artists had a way of rehabilitating ideas from one era for application in another. Paris, doubling as a modernist mecca and as a depot for objects arriving from France’s colonies, functioned art-historically as an erratic or slow-moving revolving door, with decade(s)-long intervals between one opening and the next. African objects began arriving in the city in large numbers in the 1880s, but it was not until 1905 that Europeans first appreciated their sculptural qualities. Twenty years later, Alain Locke published his first essays taking the avant-garde “discovery” as a launchpad for future appropriations of African sculpture, which he believed African American modernists would be better equipped to carry out. Ten years beyond that, Mancoba had his epiphany with *Primitive Negro Sculpture* in Cape Town, around the same time that Senghor and his collaborators were inaugurating Negritude in Paris. Another twenty-five years later, decolonization set the stage for full-fledged African modernist movements.

In response to such temporal frictions, anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle has adapted language from development theory to conceive of *décalage* as a game of catch-up in which contemporary African artists are made to perpetually chase after Western advances.³⁶ Here Amselle rehearses the “scientific” opinions of early twentieth-century thinkers, who regularly reported Africans to be backward and behind the times. Such a temptation to apply linear growth models to art history highlights the critical need to

acknowledge temporal disparities without relying on teleological narratives of evolution and progress. This is precisely the intervention that is made possible by thinking about diaspora and modernism in terms of “differences within unity.”³⁷ In addition to capturing cultural rifts, *décalage* refers to gaps in time, even as it circumvents, in Edwards’s words, “the oppositional terminology of the ‘vanguard’ and the ‘backward,’” and cannot be reduced to a “difference in evolution or consciousness.”³⁸ To extrapolate from this articulation, we may posit that the historical contours of African sculpture’s impact on modernism have been marked by stops and starts, by moments of eager advance coupled with moments of turning back. With echoes from one era regularly reverberating into another, these phenomena may be studied by paying close attention to historical sequence, albeit without attaching a hierarchy to chronological location.

Décaler, the verb form of the word, has no precise equivalent in English. It announces an abrupt shift or break that can be temporal (to delay or be held back, as in Amselle’s usage) or spatial, in the sense of a physical displacement of an object or person. This last, spatial and geographic signification points to a final way of understanding black modernisms in light of a contemporary African musical genre called Coupé-Décalé. Invented in 2002 by Ivorian DJs in Paris, Coupé-Décalé became a sensation in Abidjan before spreading to other African cities.³⁹ The name of the music belongs to Nouchi, an urban Ivorian slang combining a repurposed French lexicon with words from local languages. It translates roughly as “scammed and scammed” or “swindled and split.”⁴⁰ Referencing both the music’s ethos and its Parisian origins, *coupé-décalé* connotes something of value that has been cleverly, perhaps illegally acquired. The genre’s creators—Douk Saga, Joe Pappi, and other members of the Ivorian Jet-7 (Jet Set)—explain how they were motivated to travel to Paris to gain money and fame, but only as a prelude to returning to Abidjan to engage in “*travaillement*.” This last word, an invented nominative of *travailler* (to work), can describe extravagant public displays of wealth performed in African bars and nightclubs, with participants dressed in name-brand fashions liberated from Europe.⁴¹

To be sure, Africa’s modernist generation was not so much drawn to ostentatious displays of wealth, and was typically composed of educated elites who focused on “high” cultural production rather than the “low” conspicuous consumption embraced in Coupé-Décalé. Still, the parallel is instructive insofar as certain economic and power dynamics have not yet wholly transformed in the transition from colonial to postcolonial eras, despite the decisive shift that is sometimes imagined. Paris and the Sorbonne were key symbols of modernity for mid-twentieth-century Africans, just as cash, mobility, and clothes symbolize modernity for today’s cosmopolites from Abidjan and elsewhere. To recognize this fact is to confront the disturbing and ongoing burden of underemployment on the African continent that has prompted the anthropologist Sasha Newell to write, in the context of his research on Abidjan youth culture, that “[t]o travel to Europe and return was the foremost desire of almost every Ivoirian I met.”⁴² Noting these realities does not necessarily equate to an unfettered Europhilia,