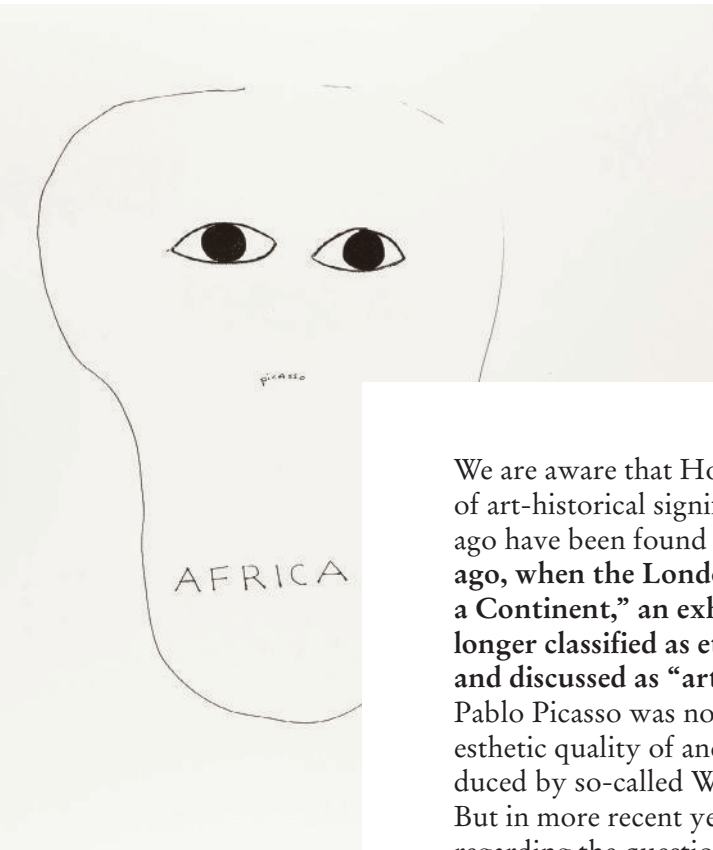


Africa. The Art of a Continent Part I



Walter De Maria:
Untitled, 1974
76 × 56 cm, Screenprint
from the portfolio
“Homage to Picasso”
Propyläen-Verlag 1975
Berlin, Ed. 30

We are aware that *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa. We know that objects of art-historical significance created as far back as 1.6 to 1.7 million years ago have been found in the *Olduvai* gorge in Northern Tanzania. **25 years ago, when the London Royal Academy presented “Africa. The Art of a Continent,” an exhibition by Tom Philipps, the objects on view were no longer classified as ethnographic artifacts, but were instead regarded and discussed as “art.”** It has been generally acknowledged since 1905, and Pablo Picasso was not the only one struck by this observation, that the esthetic quality of ancient African sculpture surpasses much of what was produced by so-called Western civilization and, subsequently, by modern art. But in more recent years we have been hearing of irreconcilable points of view regarding the question of who these works “belong to.” The dispute over the restitution of the 16th Century brass embossed Benin Bronzes is symptomatic of a sea change that by now has its source in economic and no longer just political tensions. **Many African-Americans and also Africans are setting new financial standards. They are concerned with a revaluation of their culture, of its roots as well its fruits.** It seems that Europe needed an inordinately long time to discover itself. After 1850 and until the end of the 19th century, the enormous expanse of Africa was, rather shamefully to our current understanding, considered a peripheral region of little interest and consequence. At the center of that worldview, according to Victor Hugo, stood a single nation called “Europe.” Paris was its ideal capital. Not only here but in many countries at that time, in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, theaters were experiencing a boom, and from the 1830s on, sumptuously staged operas and, later, Johann Strauss’s waltzes and Offenbach’s operettas were performed. The city planner Baron Haussmann, charged by Napoléon III. with redesigning Paris, conceived of the city as an “entertainment capital.” The rapid expansion of the railroads, the nation-building process that increased exponentially until 1870, and the vigorously growing market for books and translations led to an internationalization of culture centered in Europe. Artists and politicians alike believed in the moral goal of overcoming “cultural backwardness” and advancing the “adoption of democratic values.” All of Europe, according to Orlando Figes, was thus reading “the same books” around 1880. Monuments to writers, artists, and composers quickly sprang up in many places. In the 1870s, compulsory education was introduced in the majority of European countries, and a canonization of art became conceivable.

The highly learned author Louis Viardot published museum guides that, from the 1850s on, exerted influence on public art collections. He advised both the *Lowvre* and the *Prado* to ensure that national schools and art historical epochs were competently exhibited. **Viardot disparaged art of non-European provenance, and his summary verdict on ethnographic art consisted of calling it “bric-à-brac.”** A good hundred and fifty years later, a completely different form of diversity is in demand, both within and outside of Europe. **The old monuments and the idea of the canon are suddenly felt to be appalling.** One hopes for more equal access to resources and greater equity in the distribution of opportunities. This has become a particularly volatile issue since last year, especially in the US. The murder of George Floyd and the *Black Lives Matter* movement have produced a shock of reflection in American museums and private galleries. Since the summer of 2020, American supervisors and their staffs are required to attend anti-racist workshops. The standard terms used in this context are “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” commonly abbreviated as DEI. The acronym IDEA, standing for “inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility,” is also increasingly in use. Some establishments are setting up directorial departments for the implementation of the new core culture. Management now hires “racial equity consultants” to assist in the new employee training. **The museums are attempting to make good for something that goes back to the slaughter of millions of Native Americans, to the century-long use of human chattel for work on plantations, and to the scarcely believable toleration, over a long period of time, of disenfranchisement and Lynch justice.** The cultural establishments are in no position to either punish or undo the old offenses. They are concerned with establishing a new, curated morality that aims to expose the power relations that have victimized minorities, especially people of color, and ameliorate the most blatant inequities as far as possible. Circumspection and care are becoming a duty. Exhibitions and acquisitions are being reassessed. According to Matthew Teitelbaum, Director of the *Museum of Fine Arts* in Boston, the challenge is “to be able to develop the skills to respond to our visitors differently.” On the path to new forms of presentation and communication, Teitelbaum anticipates “a lot of interesting talking and thinking and consulting.” **Our morality is being newly curated at the moment. This is bringing about a new orientation in our view of the world.** One exciting prospect in this development, which will be the subject of Part II, is how individual artists with an African background are now defining the desired parameters themselves.

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