

Trans-Atlantic Migrations of 19th and 20th Century African Arts: Gains and Perils

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ABSTRACT: The trans-Atlantic migration of African arts in the 19th and 20th centuries was a complex historical process that profoundly reshaped global artistic landscapes. Driven by colonial expansion, trade, and globalization, this movement led to the widespread displacement of African cultural artifacts to Europe and North America, fostering global recognition of African aesthetics and influencing Western modernist movements like Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism. However, it also resulted in significant cultural losses for African societies, as sacred and symbolic objects were removed from their original contexts, disrupting traditional practices and commodifying African heritage. This article critically explores both the benefits and consequences of these migrations, highlighting how African art inspired diasporic creativity and resistance while also becoming entangled in colonial exploitation and cultural appropriation. It further examines contemporary efforts to reclaim and repatriate African art, emphasizing the roles of museums, scholars, and digital archives in restoring cultural agency to African communities. Through historical analysis and scholarly discourse, the study underscores the enduring global significance of African art and the ethical imperatives of restitution and preservation.

KEYWORDS: *African arts, Migration, Repatriation, Museum, Heritage, Culture and Identity, Colonialism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The trans-Atlantic migration of African arts in the 19th and 20th centuries is closely linked to the historical contexts of slavery, colonialism, and globalization. This movement was not simply an artistic exchange, but a result of violent displacement, exploitative trade networks, and imperial interests. Bortolot (2003) opines that, the transfer of African cultural artifacts and artistic traditions to Europe and the Americas was largely driven by colonial expeditions, missionary efforts, and the transatlantic slave trade, which disrupted indigenous cultural systems and recontextualized African art within Western paradigms. Emifoniye (2025a) also emphasized this in his assertion that meanings are often obscured or obliterated in the process of recontextualization within the new spaces in western museums.

The systematic looting of African arts and cultural objects that accompanied the colonial era was done on the premise of scientific exploration and ethnographic documentation by representatives of European powers. These objects were removed from their spiritual and communal contexts and placed in museums, where they were interpreted through a Eurocentric lens that often exoticized and devalued their cultural significance (Emifoniye, 2025a; Onibere & Edewor, 2024). The partitioning of Africa at the Berlin conference of 1884-85, provided the framework for European exploitation. In the process, Artifacts became trophies of conquest, symbols of imperial dominance, and tools for constructing narratives of Western superiority (Ogbechie, 2018). However, the presence of African arts in Europe had an influence on western modernism. Traditional European aesthetics were challenged by artists such as Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani as they encountered African masks and sculptures, which resulted in new artistic movements. However, this influence was often accompanied by a lack of acknowledgment and understanding of the cultural contexts from which these works emerged (NEH-Edsitement, n.d.).

Within Africa, colonialism took a toll on the perception and production of art. Ideologies of colonialism were gradually imbibed in the creation of hybrid forms as artists conformed to the expectations of their new patrons and changing educational systems. The missionary schools and colonial art academies introduced western techniques of art, underscoring indigenous modes and practices which did not conform to European standards (MoMAA, n.d.). This later became one of the premises for postcolonial resistance to cultural domination by artistic movements such as the Zaria rebels. This article delves into the dual impact of trans-Atlantic African art migrations, highlighting both the global acclaim and artistic innovation they inspired, as well as the cultural

dislocation, appropriation, and historical injustices they entailed. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach, to investigate the historical developments, ethical considerations, and current initiatives at repatriation and preservation of African art, emphasizing its lasting impact on global cultural narratives.

II. Historical Context

An Understanding of the trans-Atlantic migration of African art requires a critical examination of the colonial systems that enabled its displacement. Beginning in the late 19th century, European imperial powers expanded aggressively into Africa, motivated by economic ambitions and the pursuit of global dominance. According to Bahadur & Sarkhel (2024), the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, widely regarded as the formal onset of the 'Scramble for Africa,' partitioned the continent among European powers without any African representation, setting the stage for widespread cultural exploitation and the extraction of heritage. African artifacts were collected by missionaries, ethnographers and military personnel who accompanied colonial expeditions. In the guise of scientific inquiry and spiritual conversions, cultural objects were removed from their spiritual and communal contexts to be displayed in ethnographic museums in Europe as symbols of exoticism and imperial conquest (Pawłowska, 2020; MoMAA, n.d.). Kasfir (2007) noted that Sacred objects, masks, and ritual items were stripped of their meaning and reclassified as "primitive art" to fit Western narratives of cultural superiority. Many ritual sculptures belong to community shrines (Emifoniye, 2022a), where they function as divination objects. Removing them from those spaces destroys the context upon which they can be apprehended. This decontextualization of African art contributed significantly to the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems and their aesthetic philosophies (Klemm, n.d.; Khan Academy, n.d.). The commodification of African art during this period was a deliberate strategy to assert western cultural dominance. Back in Africa, traditional artistic practices were disrupted by missionary schools. Western materials and techniques were introduced that ignored indigenous forms and redefined artistic values according to western standards (Ogbechie, 2018). The result was African artists developed hybrid styles as a crossbred between traditional cultural contents and colonial expectations. On the sidelines, looting of artifacts was widespread and systematic. The 1897 Benin expedition of the British colonial power for instance, resulted in the theft of thousands of bronzes and ivory pieces from the ancient Kingdom of Benin, many of which remain in European museums today (MoMAA, n.d.). The long-term implication of these acts according to Kasfir, (2007) and Ogbechie (2018), is the depravation of African communities, access to their heritage and spiritual legacy. In response to colonial suppression, African artists developed new visual images that blended traditional motifs with western modernist ideas. These adaptations were not merely aesthetic, they were acts of resistance and cultural survival (Kasfir, 2007; Ogbechie, 2018).

III. INFLUENCE ON WESTERN MODERNISM

European artists, disillusioned with academic traditions and realism, found in African art a radically different aesthetic, one that emphasized abstraction, symbolism, and spiritual depth (Tikmani, 2023; Liu, 2024). The migration of African art to Europe and North America during the 19th and 20th centuries had a profound and transformative impact on Western modernism, catalyzing a revolution in artistic expression that led to the birth of avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Fauvism, and Expressionism.

Pablo Picasso's exposure to African masks at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris in 1907 marked a pivotal moment in his artistic evolution. Influenced by the stylized, geometric forms and spiritual symbolism of these masks (Murrell, 2008; Bussotti & Bussotti, 2022), Picasso created *Les Femmes d'Alger*, a groundbreaking work widely considered the foundation of Cubism. The painting's mask-like faces and fragmented planes reflect a conscious shift away from Western naturalism toward abstraction and multiple perspectives (Moulton, 2025).

Picasso's interest in African art went beyond its visual appeal; he recognized it as a way to overcome fear and confront the unknown (Murrell, 2008), using it to enrich his artistic expression with spiritual and psychological depth, as evidenced by the African sculptures in his studio that influenced his evolving style (Oluchi, 2024). The Parisian school and modernist movements with many artists including Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Amedeo Modigliani, and Constantin Brancusi, shared Picasso's appreciation for African art, incorporating its influences into their works and reshaping Western art with stylized forms and symbolic abstraction (Bussotti & Bussotti, 2022; Murrell, 2008). Modigliani adapted elongated facial features of the Baule masks into his sculptures and paintings, creating a blend of African and European influences (Murrell, 2008). Brancusi favored the tactile and expressive direct carving methods of African wood sculpture over the traditional casting techniques of Europe.

The influence of African sculpture on Cubism has been a subject of scholarly debate for decades. According to Ladislav Segy, African carvings introduced the "genetic idea of plastic construction" that shaped the core of Cubist aesthetics (Segy, n.d.). Through geometric simplification, abstraction, and symbolic representation, African art offered a fresh visual language that modernist artists readily embraced. As Amber (2022) notes, Cubism's departure from linear perspective and its adoption of multiple viewpoints reflect African art's focus on

spiritual and communal expression over mimetic realism. This transformation enabled artists to delve into deeper psychological and metaphysical themes, aligning with the broader ambitions of modernism.

IV. CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

The undeniable impact of African art on Western modernism prompts ethical debates regarding cultural appropriation, as many European artists often overlook its significance, treating sacred artifacts merely as aesthetic objects (Liu, 2024), raising questions about the accountability of artists and institutions in respecting the source and meaning of their influences (Emifoniye, 2025a). The incorporation of African aesthetics into Western art disrupted Eurocentric frameworks and fostered new pathways for intercultural dialogue. It underscored the global interconnectedness of artistic traditions and revealed the rich creative possibilities that emerge through cultural exchange (Tikmani, 2023).

Cultural Appropriation

Although the trans-Atlantic movement of African art brought international recognition to its aesthetic value, it also led to profound cultural disruption and appropriation. Sacred and symbolic objects, removed from their original contexts, lost their traditional significance and severed vital connections between communities and their heritage (Van Beurden, 2018). Many of these artifacts, taken during colonial expeditions, were reclassified as ethnographic specimens or primitive art, stripping them of their spiritual and communal meaning (Mbu, 2023). A striking example is the Benin Bronzes, looted by British forces during the 1897 punitive expedition. Originally housed in the royal palace of Benin, these works were scattered across European museums and private collections, becoming enduring symbols of colonial plunder and cultural loss (Merriman, 2024; Subotić, 2025). Despite persistent advocacy, efforts to return these artifacts have been slow and complicated by political and logistical hurdles (Emifoniye, 2025a).

Western museums have historically resisted repatriation efforts, often citing concerns related to preservation, legal ownership, and institutional frameworks. Yet, critics argue that such resistance perpetuates colonial legacies by withholding access to cultural heritage from African nations (Onibere & Edewor, 2024). At the heart of the ethical debate lies the question of whether cultural artifacts acquired through exploitative means should remain in these institutions or be returned to their communities of origin (Emifoniye, 2025a). The commodification of African art in Western contexts further complicates the issue. Sacred items such as masks, sculptures, and ritual objects were frequently sold or exhibited without regard for their cultural significance, transforming spiritual artifacts into marketable goods and reinforcing stereotypes and misrepresentations of African cultures (Adjei & Le Gall, 2024; Odiboh, 2005).

Museums play significant role as custodians of material and non-material cultures of a people (Emifoniye, 2025a), and its role in the social and political liberation of the community was now increasing been discussed (Emifoniye, 2022b), however, some museological practices especially of museums with colonial structures have obscured African narratives of objects in their collection (Emifoniye, 2025a). Exhibitions frequently frame African art through a Eurocentric perspective, prioritizing aesthetic appeal over cultural context and often neglecting the violent histories tied to their acquisition (Casalini, 2021). This decontextualization distorts public understanding and sidelines African voices in interpreting their own heritage. The legacy of colonialism in shaping African identity through art is profound. The imposition of Western artistic norms and the marginalization of indigenous expressions led to a crisis of representation and cultural dislocation (Ogbechie, 2018). Many African artists were compelled to conform to Western expectations, resulting in hybrid artistic forms that struggled to reconcile traditional values with imposed modernity.

In postcolonial Africa, museums and cultural institutions have emerged as critical spaces for reclaiming identity and asserting sovereignty. As institutions housing artefacts of important artistic, historical and cultural heritage, museums serve diverse educational needs (Emifoniye, 2025b) and are in position to foster narratives adverse to its collections. The contested ownership and representation of African art reflect deeper tensions between historical injustices and contemporary cultural politics (Van Beurden, 2018). Repatriation is not simply about the return of objects, it represents a broader effort to restore dignity, agency, and the continuity of cultural heritage.

Reclamation and Preservation Efforts

In recent years, efforts to preserve and reclaim African art have gained significant momentum, driven by African nations, scholars, and cultural institutions seeking to restore ownership and cultural dignity. These initiatives are diverse and dynamic, encompassing repatriation campaigns, museum reforms, digital archiving projects, and community-led programs aimed at reconnecting art with its original cultural contexts (Emifoniye, 2025a).

Repatriation has become a key strategy in the effort to reclaim African art and cultural heritage. Governments and cultural institutions across the continent have initiated bilateral negotiations with Western museums to secure the return of looted artifacts, including the Benin Bronzes and sacred masks (Emifoniye, 2025a; Onibere & Edewor, 2024). These initiatives are often supported by international legal instruments, such as UNESCO's

1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which provides a framework for addressing the restitution of cultural assets acquired through colonial exploitation (Onibere & Edewor, 2024).

African museums are increasingly taking proactive roles in safeguarding cultural heritage. Institutions such as the Museum of West African Art in Benin City have become emblematic of cultural renewal, fostering education, community engagement, and peacebuilding through heritage preservation (Eleazu, 2025). These museums serve not only as custodians of artifacts but also as dynamic spaces for dialogue and intercultural exchange. Collaborative efforts between African and international museums have further advanced conservation practices, including the establishment of conservation laboratories and training programs. For instance, Yale University's Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage has partnered with African museums to enhance conservation capacity and improve storage conditions (Yale IPCH, 2025).

Digital archiving has transformed the preservation and accessibility of African art. Initiatives such as the Van Rijn Archive at Yale University Art Gallery provide access to over 150,000 images of African artworks sourced from both museum and private collections (Yale University Art Gallery, n.d.). These digital platforms not only protect fragile materials but also democratize access to African heritage, enabling scholars and communities to engage with their cultural history remotely. Additionally, projects like the archival documentary on South African sculptor Bonginkosi Michael Gasa illustrate how digital tools can amplify marginalized voices and support cultural continuity (Cele et al., 2024).

International organizations and philanthropic foundations have played a pivotal role in advancing the preservation of African cultural heritage. Through collaborative initiatives, they have facilitated the return of looted artifacts, supported the establishment of cultural centers, and contributed to the development of ethical guidelines for museum practices (Emifoniye, 2025a; Onibere & Edewor, 2024). These partnerships are grounded in principles of mutual respect, transparency, and cultural diplomacy, fostering more equitable and inclusive approaches to heritage stewardship.

Art has served as a powerful medium for cultural preservation and resistance within the African diaspora, especially in response to historical traumas such as forced migrations, colonialism, and systemic racism. Through visual, literary, and performative arts, diasporic communities have asserted their heritage and challenged dominant narratives, using creativity as a form of identity formation and solidarity (Francis, 2013; Harris, 2005). Movements like the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude were pivotal in this regard. The Harlem Renaissance, led by figures such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, celebrated African heritage while confronting racial injustice through art deeply rooted in African traditions (Adeyemi, 2023; VanDiver, 2013). Meanwhile, Negritude, founded by intellectuals like Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, promoted pride in African culture and aesthetics, rejecting colonial ideologies and inspiring artists to incorporate African motifs and philosophies into their work (Chambers, 2024).

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s further expanded the scope of diasporic artistic expression, aligning closely with the civil rights and Black Power movements. Artists used photography, painting, and performance art to reflect their communities' struggles and aspirations, creating politically engaged work that affirmed cultural identity (Brookman & Willis, 2025). Loïs Mailou Jones exemplified the transnational dialogue between Africa and its diaspora, blending African symbolism with modernist techniques in her art. Her travels across Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe informed a body of work that challenged the boundaries between African American and African art, proposing a unified aesthetic rooted in shared heritage (VanDiver, 2013).

Contemporary diasporic artists continue this legacy by exploring themes of identity, displacement, and resistance through their work. Engaging with postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and global Black consciousness, these artists reflect the evolving nature of diasporic identity (Tenorio, 2023). Institutions like the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) and international exhibitions such as the Dakar Biennale have played crucial roles in legitimizing and showcasing diasporic art on the global stage (Francis, 2013). Ultimately, diasporic artistic expression is not just a reflection of African heritage, it is a dynamic force that redefines cultural boundaries, challenges oppression, and fosters global solidarity.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite notable progress, efforts to preserve African art continue to face significant challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and political instability. Many museums across the continent grapple with poor storage conditions and a shortage of trained professionals (Eleazu, 2025). Addressing these obstacles requires sustained investment, policy reform, and robust educational outreach. The future of African art preservation depends on empowering local communities (Emifoniye, 2022b), promoting inclusive curatorial practices, and leveraging technological innovations. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern tools, Africa can reclaim its artistic heritage and ensure its transmission to future generations.

V. CONCLUSION

The trans-Atlantic movement of African art during the 19th and 20th centuries represents a pivotal and complex chapter in global cultural history. Once removed from their indigenous contexts and reinterpreted through Western perspectives, these artworks catalyzed modernist revolutions in Europe and North America (Folabalogun, 2024). Yet, this migration also brought about cultural displacement, the erosion of spiritual heritage, and a loss of historical continuity for African communities. The legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary discourse surrounding African art. Western museums still house thousands of looted artifacts, and although repatriation efforts have gained momentum, they remain uneven and politically complex (Emifoniye, 2025a; Onibere & Edewor, 2024). At the heart of ongoing ethical debates are questions of ownership, restitution, and cultural justice, highlighting the urgent need for more inclusive and historically informed approaches to museum practices and heritage management.

Diasporic artistic expression has played a crucial role in preserving African identity and resisting cultural erasure. Artists across the African diaspora have used their work to reconnect with ancestral traditions and foster transnational solidarity, while also challenging dominant narratives (Francis, 2013). This creative resilience underscores the enduring power of African art to inspire, heal, and transform.

Looking ahead, the preservation and reclamation of African art must be rooted in principles of equity, collaboration, and cultural respect. Emifoniye (2022c) notes that the repatriation of objects taken from the kingdom of Benin for instance will boost the collections of the Benin museum, and this will provide opportunity for reclaiming its African narrative. Institutions are called to move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to structural reforms that empower African voices and communities within museum spaces (Adeyemi, 2023; Emifoniye, 2022b). Digital archives, community-driven initiatives, and international partnerships present promising avenues for restoring cultural heritage and fostering global understanding. Ultimately, the trans-Atlantic journey of African art is not solely a narrative of loss and recovery, it is a testament to the enduring vitality of a cultural legacy that continues to shape the world. By honoring this legacy and supporting its rightful custodians (Petersen, 2018), we contribute to a more just and culturally enriched global future.

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