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African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde

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African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde

Yaëlle Biro

From November 27, 2012, through September 2, 2013, The Metropolitan Museum of Art presents “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde,” a focused exhibition which investigates the formation of taste in African arts in New York during the modernist era of the 1910s and 1920s. Conceived to coincide with the centenary celebrations of the ground-breaking 1913 “International Exhibition of Modern Art,” better known as the Armory Show, the Met’s exhibition considers for the first time this key turning point for the arts in America in terms of its impact on the development of an appreciation for African arts. Indeed, while the Museum of Modern Art’s 1935 “African Negro Art” exhibition is commonly recognized as the first moment of New York’s consequential encounter with African arts, I argue that this encounter in fact took place twenty years earlier, following the Armory Show. At that time, the emergence of New York as a new platform for modern art revealed the possibility of dynamic art commerce between Europe and America. As a direct consequence of this generative event, the numerous galleries that opened in New York in 1914 all intended to acquaint their audience with the newest trends in art. Among the works they imported from Europe were African arts, which began to be systematically exhibited alongside work by the Western avant-garde. This moment constitutes the starting point of “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde.”

Since art historian Robert Goldwater published his *Primitivism in Modern Painting* in 1938, considerations of the avant-garde reception of what was then called “Primitive art” have focused on the impact it had on Western artistic practices. Half a century later, the famous 1984 exhibition “Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” at New York’s MoMA systematized this line of thought without critical detachment and provoked heated reactions among the

academic community. Scholars questioned and criticized vocally the Western-centric nature of the MoMA endeavor. While these debates were necessary and opened the door to essential scholarship marked by greater self-awareness, they also had the unfortunate consequence of suspending research on the reception of African arts in conjunction with the development of European and American modernism during the first half of the twentieth century. However, in America, the systematic joint exposure, from 1914 on, of African and modern art had a tremendous impact: today, it is still so ingrained in popular imagination that it continues to inform Western appreciation of African arts. Based on fresh research performed for my doctoral thesis (Biro 2010), “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde” considers the modernist era with African arts at its center and not as a footnote in the history of modern art. By placing the focus on the actual settings in which African artifacts were first collected and exhibited in the United States, these works are propelled beyond their role as simple props or artistic catalysts for Western artists.

Unfolding both chronologically and thematically, “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde” is divided into four sections, from the initial 1914 exhibitions of African art in New York to the engagement of African-American artists during the Harlem Renaissance of the second half of the 1920s.

1914: AMERICA DISCOVERS AFRICAN ART

The first section of the installation focuses on the year 1914 as a turning point for African arts in America, when they were pushed to the forefront of the New York contemporary art scene due to their recent role as primary catalyst for avant-garde creativity in the 1913 Armory Show. Thus, in 1914 two art galleries began introducing African sculpture to viewers primed for aesthetic novelties, including it prominently in their displays: Rob-



1 *Portrait of Max Weber* (ca. 1916)
Clara E. Sipprell (American, 1885–1975)
Gelatin silver print, in original exhibition mat; 17.5
cm x 22.5 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Museum purchase
with funds donated by Hope and Charles Hare and
Kyle and Thomas Einhorn (2005.301)
PHOTO: © 2012 MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Opening the exhibition, a 1916 portrait of American artist Max Weber (1881–1961) gazing intently at a small Yaka *biteki* male figure from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, captures the artist in an introspective moment of aesthetic contemplation. Taken by Weber's student Clara Sipprell, this photograph not only seizes a stereotypical image of the African art collector, but also epitomizes America's first encounter with African objects as art.

Between 1905 and 1908, while getting acquainted with the newest trends in art in Paris, Weber began collecting African art, which had just started to appear in Parisian studios. When he returned to America during the first days of 1909, the artist brought with him the diminutive sculpture, identified as the first African figure to have reached America for its aesthetic appeal. In doing so, he anticipated New York's discovery of African arts the following decade.

ert J. Coady's newly opened Washington Square Gallery and Alfred Stieglitz's well-established Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession. The modernist displays at work in these galleries, the juxtapositions of African art with works by Henri Rousseau, Pablo Picasso, and Constantin Brancusi, set the premises for the modes of presentation of African art in New York during the years that followed.

2 *Sculptural element from a reliquary ensemble: head*
Unidentified Fang artist (Betsi group); Gabon
19th century (collected before 1914)
Wood; 23.2 cm x 14.61 cm x 15.24 cm
Curtis Galleries, Inc.
Ex-colls.: Joseph Brummer, Paris, before 1914; Robert J. Coady, New York, by
1914; Mrs. P.A. Levine, Paris, 1940s; W.B. Loeb Trust, until 1993; (Christie's, New
York, May 18, 1993, lot 82); (Sotheby's, New York, May 17, 2002, lot 144)
PHOTO: COURTESY SOTHEBY'S

This exactly carved free-standing head with a distinctive winged, striated coiffure by a Fang master was among the first African works ever exhibited in a New York art gallery. The way in which this work was removed from Africa is not known to us. However, by the beginning of the 1910s, it was in the collection of Parisian art dealer Joseph Brummer (on Brummer, see Biro 2010:chapter 2). In 1914, Brummer expanded his commerce to America by building commercial ties with the Washington Square Gallery, a gallery recently opened by American painter Robert J. Coady. As a result of this collaboration, during spring 1914, Coady became the first American to exhibit African artifacts in his gallery next to art by modern masters such as Juan Gris and Henri Rousseau.

In a December 1914 article by art critic Alfred Kreymborg published in the *Morning Telegraph*, the presence of African art in Coady's gallery was described in the following enthusiastic terms, relaying the filiation his contemporaries saw between African and modern art: "The next most striking feature of the Washington Square Gallery are a number of blunt, queer faced, queer bodied, black figured representatives of that magnificently simple art—if art is the term you would lower it to—Congo sculpture. One is almost tempted to cry: 'Why, here are the fathers of Gauguin and Matisse and Picasso!' [...] Thirty or forty years from now you will be able to read about Congo sculpture in one of our magazines, but at present you will have to rest satisfied with the original article and no one to instruct you in your admiration" (Kreymborg 1914).





3 View of the exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" Detail from *Camera Work—A Photographic Quarterly* 48 (1916)
Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946)
Printed book with photogravure illustrations; 32 cm x 22.4 cm x 1.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, by exchange, 1953 (53.701.49)
PHOTO: © THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

"There is a wonderful show on now by Negro savages [...]. It is possibly the most important show we have ever had." This is how Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer, gallery owner, and vocal promoter of new forms of expression in early twentieth century New York, described the exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" in a letter to Arthur Dove, dated November 5, 1914. This photograph, taken by Stieglitz himself, immortalizes this exhibition, the first ever entirely dedicated to African objects as works of art, which took place at his gallery 291 from November 3–December 8, 1914. The arresting title of this exhibition, which juxtaposes exoticizing and prejudiced notions of otherness toward Africans while highlighting the catalyzing role played by their artistic creations for the emergence of Western modernity, is representative of the contradiction inherent to avant-garde thoughts toward African art at the time: while their art was being embraced as triggers of modernity, Africans themselves were still considered "savages."



4 Mask
Unidentified We or Dan artist; Côte d'Ivoire
19th–early 20th century (collected before 1914)
Wood, hair; H.: 24 cm
Musée Dapper, Paris (2825)
Ex-colls.: Paul Guillaume, Paris, before 1914; Jos Hessel, Paris, by 1924; [Charles Ratton, Paris, before 1950–84]
PHOTO: HUGHES DUBOIS, © ARCHIVES MUSÉE DAPPER

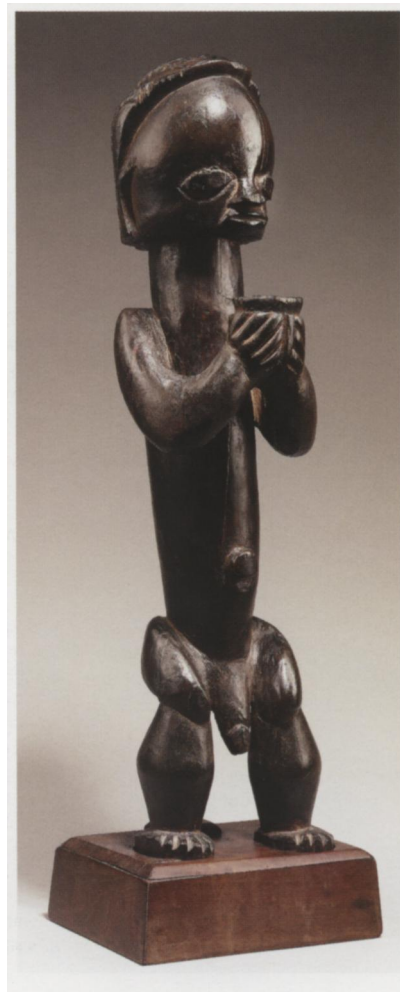
Alfred Stieglitz sent his friend and colleague the Mexican caricaturist Marius de Zayas to France to build relationships with Parisian dealers on his behalf. When the war disrupted the art business in Europe, one of them, Paul Guillaume, agreed to provide De Zayas with African sculptures to be shown in the New York exhibition at 291. Since 1911, Guillaume had positioned himself as the prime African art promoter in France. Until today, his definition of "classical" African art largely shaped the canon both in Europe and in America.

This strikingly stylized mask, an ingenious assemblage of plan surfaces and geometric shapes, is part of a limited corpus of similar masks to have entered European collections at the turn of the twentieth century. Exhibited at 291 in 1914, by 1924 it had been returned to France and was part of the private collection of French connoisseur Jos Hessel. That year, in a wording representative of the aesthetic notions projected on African art at the time, this mask was described as carved in a "cubist" manner (Level and Clouzot 1924:20).

5 Figure from a reliquary ensemble: seated male holding vessel
Unidentified Fang artist (Ntumu group); Gabon
19th–early 20th century (collected before 1914)
Wood, brass or copper; 51 cm x 58 cm
Collection Pierre Amrouche

Ex-colls.: Paul Guillaume, Paris, before 1914; Frank Burty Haviland, Paris, 1915–71; Private collection, California, until 1989; (Sotheby's, New York, November 14, 1989, lot 196)
PHOTO: © BORIS VEIGNANT

A visual focal point in the 1914 installation at 291 was this freestanding figure from a Fang reliquary prominently positioned on a pedestal. One of two works in the exhibition not to come from Côte d'Ivoire, this Fang carving epitomizes Paul Guillaume's other favored genre: the art from Gabon. After its removal from Africa at an undetermined date, this work's history was marked by a succession of transatlantic travels. In 1915, following its display at 291, it was acquired by one of the most prominent African art collectors of his time, Paris-based American artist Frank Burty Haviland. Following Haviland's death in 1971, it disappeared into an American private collection, until it resurfaced in the late 1980s and returned to France. Such geographic displacements perfectly illustrate the nature of the African art market since the beginning of the twentieth century.





6 Georgia O'Keeffe with Matisse Sculpture (1921)
 Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946)
 Palladium print; 24.4 cm x 19.2 cm
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Georgia O'Keeffe, through the generosity of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation and Jennifer and Joseph Duke, 1997 (1997.61.64)
 PHOTO: © THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

7 Georgia O'Keeffe (ca. 1918–19)
 Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946)
 Palladium print; 24.13 cm x 19.37 cm
 Collection John and Lisa Pritzker
 PHOTO: COURTESY RUTH-CATONE, © GEORGIA O'KEEFFE MUSEUM/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK

Alfred Stieglitz himself was the principal buyer of the African works exhibited at his gallery for "Statuary in Wood by African Savages." During the following years they became familiar objects, often seen hanging on the walls of his galleries or integrating his photographic compositions. His wife, the celebrated American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, inherited the African sculptures after his death. Four of them are today in a private collection, while the other five are in the holdings of Fisk University, Tennessee.

A few years apart, O'Keeffe posed for Stieglitz holding in her left hand an anthropomorphic spoon from Côte d'Ivoire and, later, Henri Matisse's *Female Torso*. While similarities between both photographic compositions are striking, Stieglitz's response to the African sculpture is visibly charged with heightened erotic energy. Beyond this noted difference, the spoon from Côte d'Ivoire and the bronze sculpture by one of the most admired modern master of the time appear to have the same aesthetic value in the photographer's eyes: identically used as props, their similar scales and subject matter certainly augment that effect. Such visual associations were critical in changing the appreciation of African artifacts into works of art.

A hybrid object that allies visual characteristics of several genres from west and central Côte d'Ivoire, the spoon is representative of the works exported at the beginning of the twentieth century from the commercial harbor towns and colonial centers of Grand Lahou and Grand Bassam to feed the growing European art market. (For a discussion on the possible trajectories of art from Côte d'Ivoire to Europe, see Visonà 2012).

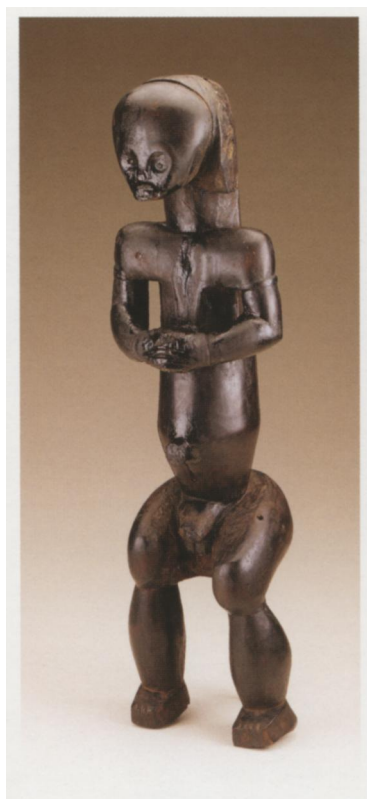
8 Marius de Zayas (1915)
 Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946)
 Platinum print; 24.5 cm x 19.4 cm
 National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.3.346
 PHOTO: COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON D.C.

In this 1915 portrait by Alfred Stieglitz, Marius de Zayas stands in front of his caricature of Katharine N. Rhoades, flanked by two masks from Côte d'Ivoire and Picasso's early etching *The Frugal Repast*. The primacy afforded the masks in relation to the European works echoes De Zayas's conviction that "African sculpture is fundamentally abstract, and it is the foundation of modern abstract art" (De Zayas 1919:n.p.). De Zayas promoted this idea in his own gallery, where this photograph was certainly taken.

9 Interior of Arensberg's Apartment, New York (1919)
 Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965)
 Casein silver print; 35.56 cm x 45.72 cm
 Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950 (1950-134-989)
 PHOTO: © PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

In this 1919 photograph, Charles Sheeler immortalized the New York apartment of art patrons and collectors Louise and Walter Arensberg located on West 67 Street. From 1915 through 1920, they hosted a daily salon, which was a gathering center for members of the international avant-garde. During that time, De Zayas was a friend and advisor to the Arensbergs, who assembled over the years one of the most daring art collections of the time. The photograph attests of De Zayas's influence: as in his galleries, the living-room juxtaposes African, pre-Columbian, and modern art. Most striking is the parallel display on the mantelpiece of Brancusi's 1915 sculpture *The Prodigal Son* at left and the Fang reliquary figure at right. To create a visual echo between both sculptures, the Fang figure has been positioned on a cylindrical marble pedestal, imitating one of Brancusi's signatures.





1915–1919: ACQUIRING A TASTE FOR AFRICAN ART

Following the first moment of discovery by New York amateurs, the city progressively positioned itself as a central marketplace for African art. The second section of the exhibition is devoted to the period between 1915 and 1919, which corresponds to an “apprenticeship” for dealers and collectors alike. Over those years, France remained the exclusive source of African arts for the several American dealers who systematically promoted it and presented examples to a growing group of interested collectors. Chief among these “propagandists” was Mexican artist and gallery owner Marius de Zayas.

Between 1915 and 1921, De Zayas positioned himself as the foremost proponent of African art in New York, keeping a rotating stock of African sculptures on constant display in his galleries. An artist himself, he heralded what he saw as the transformative power of African art on contemporary creation in all his undertakings. Unsurprisingly, the collections he helped build were those of the most adventurous modern art collectors of the 1910s, among them American collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg, John Quinn, and Agnes and Eugene Meyer (Biro 2010:chapter 3).

A prolific theorist and essayist, De Zayas developed over almost two decades a series of essays, many of them published in the journal *Camera Work*. Inspired by evolutionist anthropology, its underlying goal was to demonstrate “scientifically” the role of the “primitive” as a source of inspiration for innovative creation. De Zayas’s evolutionist take on artistic development has often been criticized for its outdated racist overtone. Through his theory, however, De Zayas was able to underline the radical nature of avant-garde thoughts: in a period of heightened racism, many artists saw in African art a way to progress and not regress.

De Zayas’s Modern Gallery opened its doors in October 1915, thanks to the financial support of patrons Eugene and Agnes Meyer. Established as the commercial branch of 291, its opening statement announced “the sale of paintings of the most advanced character of the modern art movement, negro sculptures, pre-conquest Mexican art and photography” (De Zayas Archives, Seville).

10 Figure from a reliquary ensemble: seated male holding horn
Unidentified Fang artist (Ngumba group); southern Cameroon,
Lokoundje Valley

19th century (collected before 1913)

Wood, metal strips; H.: 58.7 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg
Collection, 1950 (1950-134-200)

Ex-colls.: Joseph Brummer, Paris, before 1913?; Charles Vignier,
Paris, 1913–19?; Marius de Zayas, New York, 1919; The Walter and
Louise Arensberg Collection, New York and Los Angeles, 1919

PHOTO: © PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

In 1918, Walter Arensberg began to financially support De Zayas’s second commercial endeavor, the De Zayas Gallery. In fall 1918, while sojourning in France in the search for new material, De Zayas met Charles Vignier, a former Symbolist poet turned successful art dealer. During the next two years, Vignier acted as De Zayas’s main art supplier. These two Fang reliquary elements were among the first works he sent to America.

Archives reveal that Arensberg purchased his Fang works, including this full-bodied figure armed with a weapon, in May 1919, shortly after their arrival in New York. Whereas before 1918 the maximum ever paid in New York for an African work was \$200, Arensberg acquired the figure for \$1000 and the head for \$3500, reflecting Vignier’s practice of asking relatively high prices. It is possible that these works’ publication in Carl Einstein’s 1915 *Negerplastik*, the most famous publication to date on the plastic qualities of African art, drove their prices higher.

11 Figure from a reliquary ensemble: seated figure

Unidentified Fang artist (Ntumu group); Equatorial Guinea or
Gabon

19th century (collected before 1916)

Wood, oil; H.: 58.7 cm

National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution, Wash-
ington, D.C., Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
(72-41-3)

Ex-colls.: Paul Guillaume, Paris, before 1917; Marius de Zayas, New
York, 1917; Agnes and Eugene Meyer, New York, ca. 1918–72

PHOTO: FRANK KHOURY

Due to its prestigious provenance and imposing presence, this sculptural element of a Fang reliquary is undoubtedly the most famous work from the Agnes and Eugene Meyer collection. Like most African works removed from their original context and imported to the West, this seated Fang figure experienced several changes from its place of collection in Africa to the Meyers’s home. It was first separated from its relics’ container; the peg, which extended downwards in prolongation of the spine to affix the figure to the container was partly broken at an undetermined time; recent scientific analyzes have demonstrated that the hands were repaired and that they might have originally held a bowl, in a traditional gesture of offering. Its positioning on a wooden pyramidal display mount constituted the last step in the affirmation of its new status of “work of art.”

Photographed by Charles Sheeler in late 1917 or early 1918 for the portfolio *African Negro Wood Sculpture*, clever lighting arrangement and striking composition were largely responsible for transforming this work into a modernist icon. Marked by years of working alongside Alfred Stieglitz, De Zayas made extensive use of the photographic medium as a way to highlight the artistic nature of African artifacts. To do so, he leaned on the sharp eye of American artist Charles Sheeler, whose photographs serve as rare records of African works circulating in New York during that period. Sheeler started collaborating with De Zayas’s Modern Gallery in 1916, taking photographs of works on display as gallery records. Sheeler’s interest in African sculpture is made evident through *African Negro Wood Sculpture*, a collaboration with De Zayas. Its twenty photographic plates are introduced by De Zayas with an essay expressing the foundation of his theory on modern and African art: “the Negro artist has been to us a revelator and an innovator. Negro sculpture has been the stepping stone for a fecund evolution in our art. It brought to us a new form of expression and a new expression of form, finding a point of support in our sensibility” (Sheeler and De Zayas, 1918).



12 *Negro Song I* (1913)

Francis Picabia (French, 1879–1953)

Watercolor and graphite on paperboard; 66.4 cm x 55.9 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.70.15)

PHOTO: © 2011 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

In 1913, traveling for the first time to New York for the Armory Show, Francis Picabia was struck by the raw energy of the city, which he considered the epitome of modernity. Describing the city itself as Cubist, he was inspired to create a series of abstract watercolors, exhibited shortly afterward at 291. According to Picabia's own testimony, the spark for *Negro Song I* was an evening at a jazz club, where he heard "black music" for the first time. Repeatedly during the following years, De Zayas paired in his gallery new works by Picabia with African sculpture. Through an almost systematic association of Picabia's industrial/New York-inspired works with African art, De Zayas acknowledged the tight relationship he perceived between black America, New York's modernity, and the city's growing interest in African art.

13 Maiden Mask (*agbogho mmuo*)

Unidentified Igbo artist; Nigeria

19th–early 20th century (collected before 1922)

Wood, pigment; H.: 44.4 cm

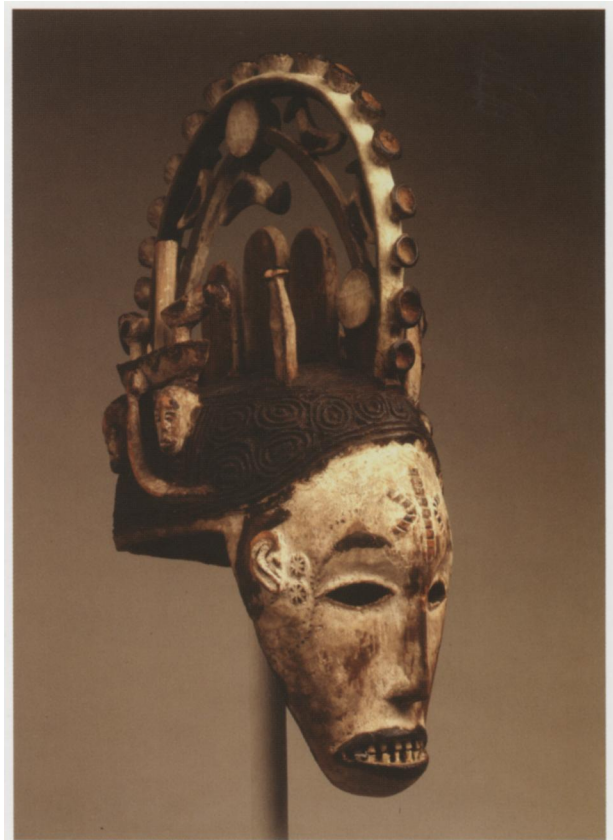
The University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (AF 5371)

Ex-colls.: Joseph Brummer, New York, before 1922; John Quinn, New York, 1922–24; John Quinn Estate, New York, 1924–26

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE PENN MUSEUM, IMAGE # 150519

In "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde," the African holdings of New York lawyer and art patron John Quinn (1870–1924) are represented by seven works, selected from a group of forty. A heteroclite assemblage of various origins and aesthetic appeal, these works circulated from Europe to America between 1913 and 1921. Thanks to Quinn's detailed accounting ledgers held at the New York Public Library, rare details are known about what can be considered the most important private African art collection assembled in the United States before 1924. It is the first time that select works from this prestigious collection, now dispersed in several holdings, are assembled.

In 1922, Joseph Brummer sold to Quinn this precisely carved Igbo maiden mask from south-eastern Nigeria for \$200 (for a complete overview of John Quinn's African art collection, see Biro 2009). Art from eastern Nigeria seldom entered private collections until later in the twentieth century. This mask's presence in New York at such an early date illustrates the unexpected breadth of early trade-networks of African art.



14 *John Quinn Album of African Art* (1919)

Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965)

Gelatin silver print; 41.12 cm x 33.81 cm

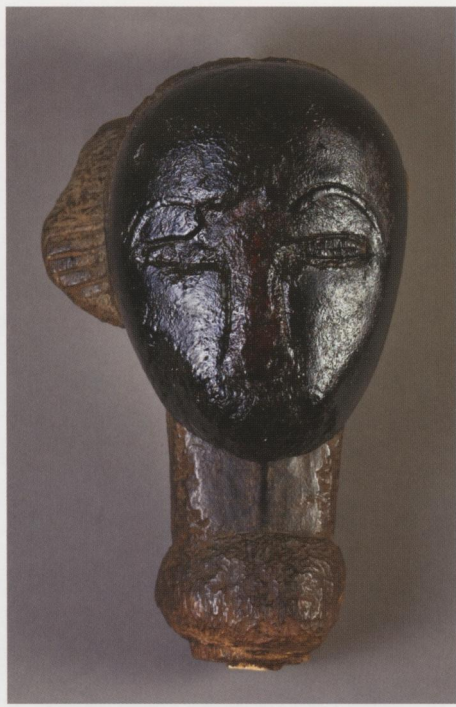
The Lane Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (L-R 2689.2001)

PHOTO: © THE LANE COLLECTION. COURTESY, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

In 1919, John Quinn commissioned Charles Sheeler to create a photographic album of his growing African art collection. Once completed, this album continued the visual conversation Sheeler had initiated with his famous 1918 portfolio *African Negro Wood Sculpture*. Composed of twenty-seven plates, it alternates group photographs and singled out works.

The opening plate is a striking arrangement of six sculptures from West and Equatorial Africa. Sheeler both hides and reveals each work's specific features through a strong interplay of light and shadow. Figures are arranged in a dynamic composition in which each of them springs to life. As a consequence of the dispersal of Quinn's holdings following his untimely death in 1924, both his African art collection and Sheeler's photographic renderings of it faded into obscurity until today.





(counterclockwise from left)

15 Sculptural element from a reliquary ensemble: head
Unidentified Fang artist (Betsi Group); Gabon
19th–early 20th century (collected before 1923)
Wood; H.: 21 cm

Troyes, Musée d'art moderne, collections nationales Pierre et Denise Lévy, France (MNPL 1879)

Ex-colls.: Paul Guillaume, Paris, before 1918–1934; Paul Guillaume Estate, Paris, 1934–65; (Hôtel Drouot, Paris 1965, lot 146); Denise and Pierre Lévy, France, 1965–77

PHOTO: © CAROLE BELL

By 1923, two years after the closing of the De Zayas Gallery and the end of his commercial endeavor, De Zayas was considered one of the finest connoisseurs of the evolution of modern movements in America. Gertrude Whitney and Juliana Force, the individuals behind the newly founded Whitney Studio, approached him to organize an exhibition that would summarize his perspective on that subject. As a response, De Zayas organized "Recent Paintings by Pablo Picasso and Negro Sculpture." Works by Picasso, which surveyed thirteen years of Cubism, were largely provided by the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in Paris; the African works, including this reliquary element, all belonged to Paul Guillaume. The exhibition was described by the press as "one of the most perfectly arranged exhibitions ever held in New York" ("The Exhibitions: Picasso at the Whitney Galleries." *The Arts*, April 1923, pp. 364–65). This Fang reliquary head corresponds in all respects to the aesthetic promoted by Guillaume: an oily, lustrous patina, delicately carved features, and eroded wood showing signs of age. The dealer selected it as one of the works he lent in the winter of 1923–24 to the first exhibition to take place in a Parisian institution, the Pavillon de Marsan.

16 Prestige stool (Kipona)

Luba artist identified as the Master of the Warua or the Master of the Kunda (possibly active between 1780 and 1810); Luvua Valley Region, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Late 18th–early 19th century

Wood, glass beads; 42.2 cm x 23.2 cm x 21.4 cm

The University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (AF 5121)

Ex-colls.: Joseph Van den Boogaerde, Belgium, collected between 1913–16; Charles Vignier, Paris, before 1919; Marius de Zayas, New York, 1919

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE PENN MUSEUM, IMAGE # 150529

The University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia was the first American institution to actively purchase African art for its aesthetic qualities and not solely as the last remaining ethnographic records of disappearing societies. In 1919, its influential director George Gordon acquired through the De Zayas Gallery a group of eleven works from the holdings of Parisian dealer Charles Vignier.



This celebrated prestige stool was collected by Belgian colonial officer Joseph Van den Boogaerde while on post in the Kongolo territory of Eastern Congo between 1913 and 1916. How Charles Vignier came across them remains a mystery, but by 1919, he was in possession of several works from this source and had sent them to the De Zayas Gallery.

17 Figure: female

Unidentified Beembe or Dondo-Kamba artist;
Republic of Congo
19th–early 20th century (before 1913)

Wood with glass, white pigment, and animal claw;
60.2 cm x 14 cm x 11.5 cm

The University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (AF 5119)

Ex-colls.: Joseph Brummer, Paris, before 1913;
Charles Vignier, Paris, 1913–19; Marius de Zayas, New York, 1919

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE PENN MUSEUM, IMAGE # 175174

When compared to early photographs of this work, it appears that while it lost the earring loops it originally wore, it has kept its most important and distinctive traits: the amalgam of powerful matter packed at the top of its head enhanced by an animal claw inserted at top, and the delicate motifs drawn with white pigment on the surface of its face. It was displayed in 1913 in the exhibition of Charles Vignier's collection at the Galerie Levesque in Paris, famous for being the first exhibition in France to have featured African objects in an artistic setting. Vignier had certainly acquired it from Joseph Brummer shortly before the exhibition and was among the works illustrated in 1915 in Carl Einstein's seminal *Neugerplastik*.



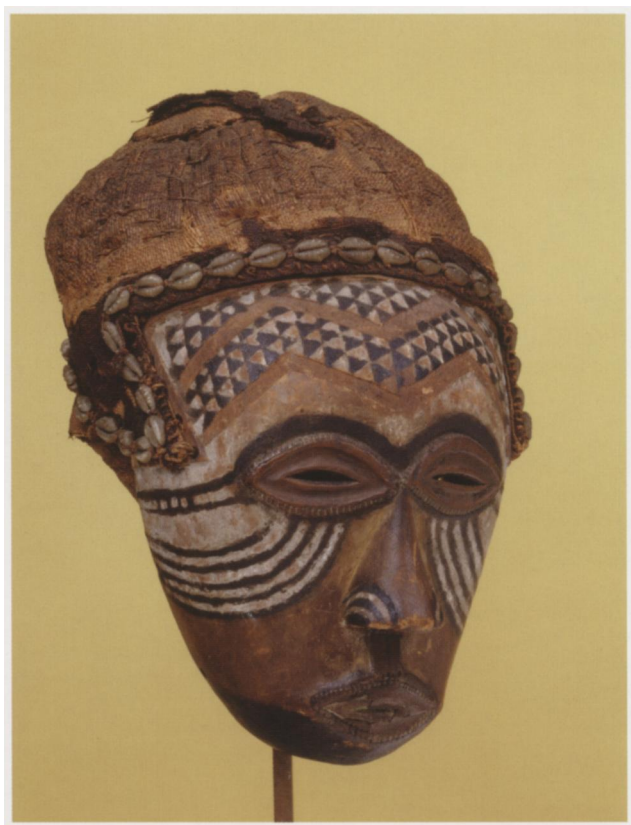
18 Installation view of Whitney Studio Club exhibition "Recent Paintings by Pablo Picasso and Negro Sculpture" (1923)
Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965)
Gelatin silver print
H. x W.: 7 ½ x 9 3/8 in. (19.1 x 23.8 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, (93.23.3)
PHOTO: ROBERT GERHARDT

This photograph by De Zayas's collaborator Charles Sheeler visually records the exhibition "Recent Paintings by Pablo Picasso and Negro Sculpture." It features the Fang reliquary head and its direct surroundings, including Picasso's paintings *Guitar*, *Clarinet*, and *Bottle on a Pedestal Table* (1916), *Female Nude (J'aime Eva)* (1912–13) and a series of 1920 stencils. While, at the end of the exhibition, the Fang head was sent back to its French owner, Paul Guillaume, most of the other African works seen in the photographs were acquired from Guillaume by his most active American client, the collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes.

19 Female face mask (*ngady mwaash*)
Unidentified Kuba artist; Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–early 20th century (before 1926)
Wood, pigment, raffia textile, cowrie shells; 33 cm x 26 cm
Art and Artifacts Division of the Schomburg Collections, New York Public Library

Ex-colls.: Raoul Blondiau, Brussels, after 1900–before 1926; Theatre Arts Monthly, as the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection, New York, 1926; Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library, ca. 1933 PHOTO: ©ART AND ARTIFACTS DIVISION, SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

From February 7 through March 5, 1927, Locke organized the exhibition "Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art" at The New Art Circle, a gallery owned by early champion of German Expressionism and American Modernism, J.B. Neumann. This mask was featured on the exhibition catalogue's cover (*The New Art Circle* 1927), announcing the main focus of the collection as being Kuba art. About 500 works were exhibited and made available for purchase on that occasion. Locke's hope was to assemble enough funds to create a Harlem Museum of African Art, where the remaining art would be permanently hosted. His stated goal was "to preserve and interpret the ancestral arts and crafts of the Negro and make them effective as fresh cultural inspiration for Negro art and culture in America" (Locke 1927:n.p.) Unfortunately, Locke's ambitious project of founding a Harlem Museum of African Art never came to fruition. Unsold works from the Blondiau Collection were eventually dispersed across American museums and historically black universities, while the largest bulk entered the collection of the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library.



1919–1923: A MOVE TOWARD INSTITUTIONS

At the turn of the twentieth century, the flexible nature of art galleries allowed the promotion of novel ideas and talents. Comparatively, museums appeared as the outdated keepers of an academic art and, in particular with regards to ethnographic museums, as the public faces of imperialism and nationalism. By 1919, both in Europe and America, the status of African art had changed considerably, leading the Paul Guillaume to exclaim: "Negro art is fashionable!" (Guillaume 1919:4) This shift in perspective extended to institutions, which began to consider African artifacts for their aesthetic value. In the United States, the most visible manifestations of this changed approach were the opening in 1922 of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania, where Dr. Albert C. Barnes exhibited his African holdings alongside his important collection of modern masters; and a seminal 1923 exhibition organized at the Brooklyn Museum by curator Stewart Culin. Both men had developed close connections with Europe, acquiring works directly from there. By contrast, other institutional exhibitions and collections found their origin within the burgeoning American marketplace. This third section of the installation focuses on the most influential among these: exhibitions at the Whitney Studio—the forerunner to New York's Whitney Museum of American Art—and collections assembled by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia.

THE BLONDIAU-THEATRE ARTS COLLECTION AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

To provide African-American artists with study material, philosopher Alain LeRoy Locke, helped by a magazine dedicated to performing arts, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, secured an ensemble of about 1,000 African works from the collection of Brussels-based photographer Raoul Blondiau. Locke championed African sculpture as great art and sought to stimulate African-American artists' awareness of what he called "our ancestral arts." While studying in Europe during the 1910s, he had become aware of the impact African arts had on the artistic innovations of the likes of Picasso and Matisse. This African connection led Locke to think that by drawing from their African heritage, African-American artists could access a new world of artistic innovations. As Locke had hoped, his active promotion of these works triggered contemporary artistic responses by African-American artists, as is exemplified in this final section of the exhibition. (For an in depth study of the racial component of the African arts' reception in America, see Shannon 1999.)

The selection of works featured in "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde" brings to light one underlying theme that runs throughout the installation: the nature of African art's trade-networks during the first quarter of the twentieth century. With commercial routes circulating from Africa to Europe and from Europe to the United States, American sources for African art remained anchored in Europe. Such halted trajectories informed the genres of works available in New York and the progressive shift in their significance: in each new location, layers of information relating to the works' original context were lost, replaced by new ideas projected by their changing owners. Both French and Belgian dealers acquired African works primarily through colonial channels, from either administrators or commercial ships traveling back and forth to the colonies. As is made evident throughout the exhibition and the present selection, such collecting framework explains the predominance in the United States of works from former French and Belgian colonies: particularly well represented in New York at the time are works from French West Africa's coastal regions (present-day Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea), French Equatorial Africa (especially Gabon and Republic of Congo), and the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Another essential consequence of these commercial routes consists in the fact that works arriving in America had passed through the European "filter" and could be immediately incorporated into modernist discourse, as if validated by that European provenance. In Europe, however, the approach to African arts remained sharply marked by experiences of ethnographic displays infused with colonialism.

Naturally, the story of the American reception of African art did not stop at the end of the 1920s, although this is a limit imposed by the framework of "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde." In fact, as already mentioned, it is most commonly assumed that this history started only in 1935 with the watershed MoMA exhibition "African Negro Art." As "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde" hopes to demonstrate, the transfor-



20 *Negro Masks* (1932)

Malvin Gray Johnson (American, 1896–1934)

Oil on canvas; 50.8 cm x 45.72 cm

Collection of Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA

PHOTO: COLLECTION OF HAMPTON UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, HAMPTON, VA

Stewarded by the Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organization dedicated to "creating a wider interest in the work of the Negro artist as a contribution to American culture" (Harmon Foundation catalogue 1928, no. 1, n.p.) painter Malvin Gray Johnson was praised for his thoughtful and bold treatment of African-American life. Born in North Carolina, he moved to New York, where he studied painting at the National Academy of Design. His work embraced principles learned from observing European modern masters, simplifying objects to geometric forms. He applied these precepts to African-American subjects, such as Harlem Street scenes and images inspired by Negro spirituals.

In the early 1930s, certainly encouraged by Alain Locke, Johnson used as motifs works from the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection in his painting *Negro Masks*. Pictured are a Yoruba Gelede helmet mask from Nigeria and a Bwa mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (better known as Boa) arranged over a graphic Kuba textile. While these masks might have been intended for the art market from their inception, for the artist they embodied an authentic and powerful image of Africa.



21 Head-shaped cup (mbwoong ntey)
Unidentified Kuba artist;
Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–early 20th century
(before 1926)
Wood; H.: 20.6 cm
Howard University Gallery
of Art, Washington, D.C.
Ex-colls.: Raoul Blondiau,
Brussels, after 1900–
before 1926; Theatre Arts
Monthly, as the Blondiau-
Theatre Arts Collection,
New York, 1926; Alain
LeRoy Locke, until his
death in 1954; Gift of the
Estate Collection of Dr.
Alain Locke, 1954
PHOTO: © JAMES K. PLEASANT

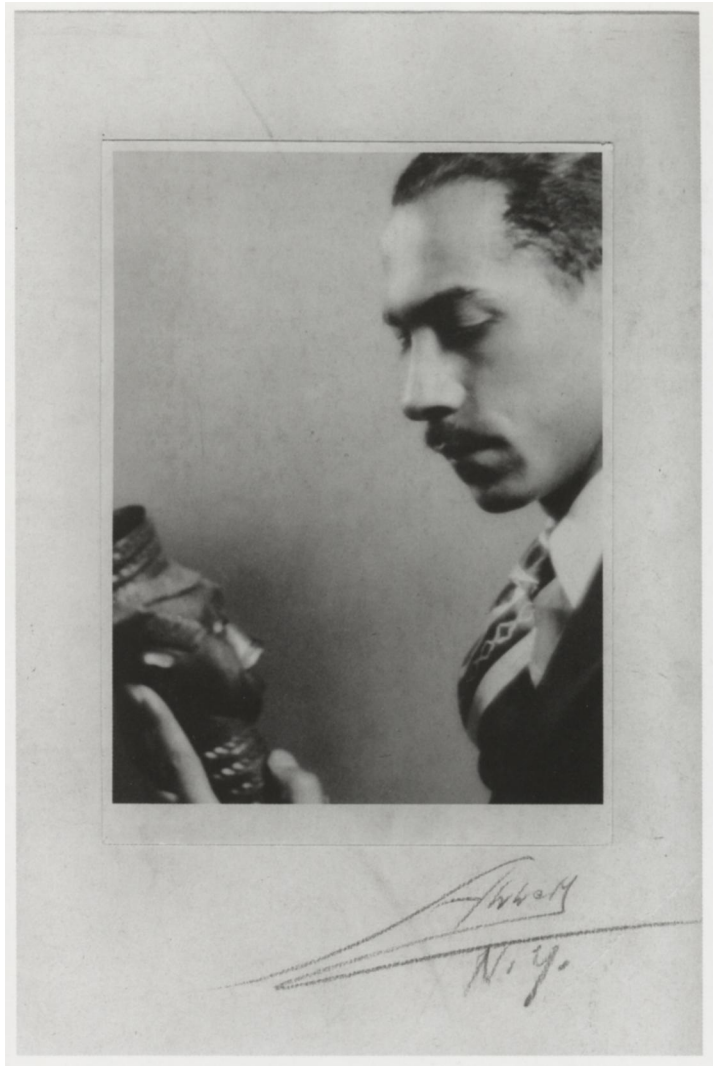
22 Portrait of James
Lesesne Wells (ca. 1930)
James Latimer Allen (Amer-
ican, 1907–1977)
Gelatin silver print, sepia

toned; 31.75 cm x 24.13 cm

Papers of Alain Locke, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University

Another artist celebrated by the Harmon Foundation was James Latimer Allen, who served as staff photographer to the Foundation. A successful portraitist established in Harlem's W. 121 Street, he was known and appreciated for his many portraits of the community's leading writers and graphic artists.

Once again, a work from the Blondiau Collection inspired Allen's c. 1930 portrait of the master printmaker and art educator James Lesesne Wells (1902–1993) holding a ceremonial Kuba drinking vessel. The anthropomorphic nature of the prestige cup and Wells's attentive gaze convey to this image a sense of tête-à-tête and silent intimate conversation. That the photograph's model, James L. Wells, was himself among the Harlem Renaissance artists who most fervently embraced African art as—in his own words—a “source of inspiration and pride” (Bearden and Henderson 1993:390) only adds relevance to the photograph. Closing the installation, it works as a pendant to Max Weber's 1916 portrait (Fig. 1), which opened the exhibition, echoing a parallel first highlighted by Wendy Grossman (2009:72–74).



mative 1935 events did not rise out of virgin territory but came as the culmination of two decades of “propaganda” led by a group of artists, collectors, and art dealers, and as the natural consequence of intense transatlantic cultural and commercial activities. These have paved the way in which African works often continue to be

perceived today: disconnected from their original meaning and reinterpreted through the modernist approach.

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