The representation of the eye in African and Oceanian art

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Everyday, it is proven that Africa has been the cradle of human race. The first traces of man and, consequently of his culture, are located in Olduvai Gorges, to the East of Lake Victoria, in Tanzania.

If we refer to the XVth and XVIth century cartography initiated by the Arabs or the Portuguese, we are immediately struck by the isolation and the lack of knowledge of Europeans concerning African life (Fig. 1).

However, we know that, as early as this period, the works of art which were brought back to Europe could easily be integrated into the collections of Roman Catholic Kings.

Several periods are important in the evolution of the knowledge of African Art:

— 1486: The Portuguese Diago Cao gives several African works of art to Charles the Bold.

Fig. 1. Map of Africa. XVIth century (private collection).
— 1527: Francis I receives several African works of art from Dieppe sailors.
— XVIth century: in Rome, Kircher, a Jesuit, founds the first African Museum with several statues from the Congo.
— 1668: Dapper (Holland) describes the capital of Benin.

By the end of the XIXth century, the German ethnologue, Leo Frobenius, undertook the first major survey of Africanism. Two Englishmen, Read and Dalton, discover the Benin Art and in France, the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum is inaugurated in 1879.

Important exhibitions were dedicated to Africa, in Leipzig (1892), in Antwerp (1894) and before the opening of the Belgian Congo Museum at Brussels-Tervuren in 1897.


The beginning of the XXth century corresponds to the great period of initiation in African and Oceanian art.

Some painters such as Picasso and Maurice de Vlaminck realized the interest that this art might present for some European artists in search of new techniques. The latter considered Negro art in all its primitivism and in all its grandeur.

In 1906–1907, Picasso painted "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" where, on the right side of the painting, the form was created by parallel lines of colour, which announce cubism. With this work, Picasso inaugurated his "negro period", characterized by figures whose sharply marked features evoked those of African sculptures.

Other painters, such as Derain who originated fauvism, Marcel Duchamp who promoted the Dadaist movement together with Picabia who made a painting called "Chanson Nègre" in 1913, underwent the same influence.

In sculpture, the cubist school was also inspired by African Art.

Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in 1912 a poem entitled "Zone" where the Negro African theme appears for the first time.

In Germany, an exhibition on Black Art was presented at the Folkwangmuseum in Hagen in 1912 and Carl Einstein published Negerplastik (Leipzig, Verlag der Weissen Bücher, 1915) where the major qualities of African sculptures are outlined.

In Zürich, Tristan Tzara, one of the founders of the Dadaist movement, observed in his article (published in Paris in the journal "Sic") that "Sym-