



THE BARNES

Then and Now

Dialogues on Education, Installation,
and Social Justice

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CONTENTS

Foreword and Acknowledgments	vii
Thom Collins	

Introduction	1
Martha Lucy	

PART 1

Education

The Factory Experiments	23
Alison Boyd	

The Barnes Method	39
William M. Perthes	

Decades of Devotion: Violette de Mazia and Art Education at the Barnes	61
Bertha Adams	

CONVERSATION Close Looking at the Education Program	83
Rika Burnham and William M. Perthes, moderated by Monique Scott	

PART 2

Installation

Albert C. Barnes, Display Artist	99
Dario Gamboni	

“Art with a Capital A”: Competing Systems of Value for Barnes’s African Sculpture Collection in the 1920s and 1930s	123
Alison Boyd	

“Strong Modernism” and Its Global Others: The Barnes Foundation’s Production of Modernity	147
Tatiana Flores and Rebecca Uchill	

CONVERSATION Reflections on the Installation	173
Dario Gamboni and Martha Lucy, moderated by Monique Scott	

PART 3

Social Justice

Education and Empowerment: Albert C. Barnes and His Visionary Scholarship Program for African Americans	191
Barbara Anne Beaucar	

Revisiting Barnes and Dewey’s Progressive Vision: An International Perspective	221
Kazuyo Nakamura	

CONVERSATION On the Barnes’s Relationship with Lincoln University	239
Brenda A. Allen and Thom Collins, moderated by Roxanne Patel Shepelavy	

CONVERSATION Reflections on Art and Social Justice	253
Jane Golden and Valerie Gay, moderated by Roxanne Patel Shepelavy	

Selected Bibliography	267
The Barnes: A Timeline	273
Index	279
About the Contributors	289
Photography Credits	291



“Art with a Capital A”

Competing Systems of Value for Barnes’s African Sculpture Collection in the 1920s and 1930s

ALISON BOYD

The Barnes Foundation’s art displays are now famously frozen in place. Preserved as they were left by the collector Albert Barnes, the ensembles may seem to ask us to see the art now just as Barnes did more than a century ago. However, the meanings of objects in the collection, and their relationships on the walls, have always been in flux. When Barnes formed the collection, the two axes along which he placed objects were the European categories of “primitive” and “modern.” But even in his own time, viewers structured relationships between the works in the collection according to their own visions and agendas. Rather than fix in place a clear primitive/modern binary, Barnes’s collection began transnational conversations and contestations about art, race, and modernism.

Barnes first encountered African sculpture as the “primitive” correspondent to “modern” European paintings in Paris in the 1910s, through the French art dealer Paul Guillaume. The pairing of “modern” European and “primitive” African art revolutionized Barnes’s understanding of art and aesthetics, and he made them the two central pillars of his collection in the early 1920s (fig. 1). When the Barnes Foundation opened in 1925, its original display consisted exclusively of modern European painting and African sculpture. African sculpture—whose importance Barnes signaled through its representation as the central motif decorating the original building’s façade—was thus fundamental to the very conception of the foundation and to Barnes’s hopes for American art (fig. 2).¹

Through his collection, Barnes, especially in conversation with influential African American intellectuals, actively worked to shift the “value” of African sculpture in Western museums from that of an “ethnographic

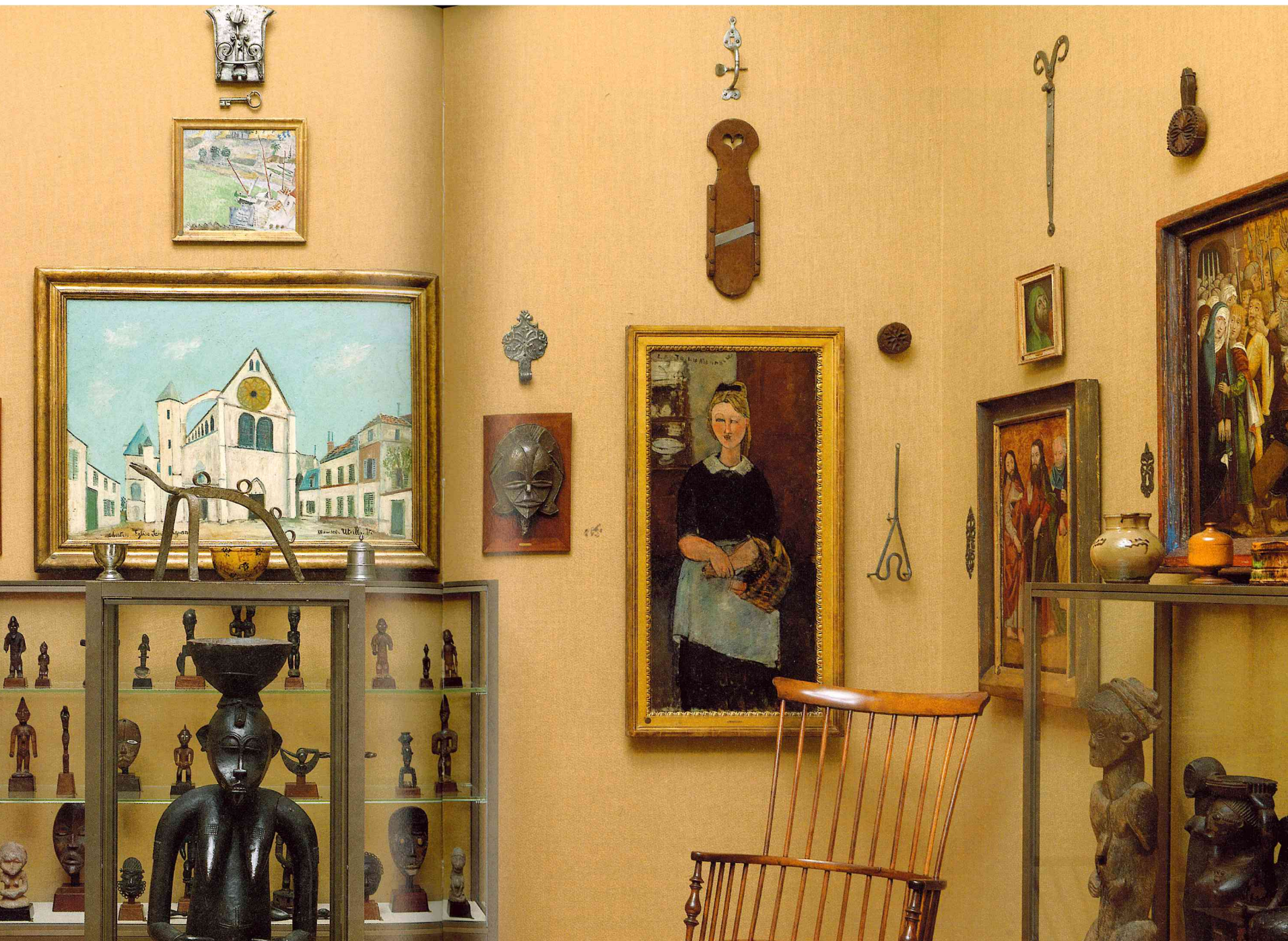




Fig. 2. Entrance of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, featuring replicas of African sculpture on the façades

curiosity” to “art.”² But even as Barnes and his interlocutors categorized African sculpture as art, a question remained open: what kind of art? The figures who engaged with the foundation’s collection—Black and white; American, European, and African; artist and collector; each with their own motivations—projected a range of meanings onto the collection. Their definitions of African sculpture ran the full gamut: ethnographic specimen, primitive, ancient, classical, and indeed as modern. These categories and the sets of values associated with them almost always pivoted on two key questions: what and who was African sculpture for?

Although Barnes used “primitive” and “modern” as aesthetic terms, these labels were, and are, deeply ideological.³ They project and reproduce

colonial logics onto this diverse set of sculptures (and paintings) in ways that often obscure their complex histories and networks of meaning. For example, Barnes, along with most European modernist artists, critics, and curators, insisted on an unbridgeable temporal gap between the African sculpture and the modern European paintings in his collection. Barnes cordoned off “good” African sculpture as timelessly ancient, since he believed that contact with Europe had been the moment that began its decline. Recent studies of the collection show that most of the African sculpture in it was, in fact, made in the mid-to-late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and thus the pieces are often exact contemporaries of the modern European paintings they stand next to.⁴ This unravels Barnes’s original categories; it also can and should reorient our contemporary vision of the ensembles. In some cases, sculpture in the collection was constructed from materials obtained through international trade or created in response to a European export market. The African-European exchanges of avant-garde “primitivism” were, in fact, often premised on the modern syncretic spaces in which African sculptors were currently working. Much of the sculpture in the Barnes collection was therefore created in relationship to new networks and pressures of globalization and modernization in ways both similar to, and different from, the modernist paintings.

To contest the meaning and status of the African sculpture in the Barnes collection, however, is nothing new; it is in the very fabric of the foundation’s own history. In the 1920s and 1930s, various figures—including the white American collector Albert Barnes, his French art dealer Paul Guillaume, and the African American critics Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, artist Aaron Douglas, and poet Countee Cullen—all worked to mobilize the African sculpture in the collection toward sometimes aligned, and sometimes conflicting, systems of value. These values emerged out of a primitive/modern binary but also, from the very beginning, subverted those terms. While the relationships between objects in the foundation’s art ensembles may, at first glance, appear firmly fixed in place, it is more useful to see them as always in dynamic tension, as viewers have constantly contested and reinterpreted their meanings and relationships.

STAGING AN ENCOUNTER: CANONICAL AFRICAN SCULPTURE AND MODERN EUROPEAN PAINTING

Barnes started collecting in an art world that staged African art as a source of both fascination and terror.⁵ We can better understand his position by viewing it in the context of Pablo Picasso’s well-known, catalytic visit in 1907 to

the colonial Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, which he described as a dirty "flea market." He later recounted his terror of the African sculptures' hostile power—but not what he had learned from their formal qualities—as the impetus for his famous modernist painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, created later that year.⁶ Like other European primitivist artists in Barnes's collection (Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani), Picasso engaged both formally and conceptually with the abstract visual language he saw in African and Oceanic sculptural forms. He viewed them as radical "others" to an exhausted classical and academic European tradition. But in doing so, he emphasized the transformative experience of these works' atavistic power, not their sophisticated formal innovations.⁷

Crucial to Barnes—and perhaps even more so to the dealer Paul Guillaume, who co-authored with the teacher Thomas Munro (and with Barnes himself as an unnamed writer) the foundation's 1926 book *Primitive Negro Sculpture*—was that African sculpture's primary contribution was to the "enrichment and stimulation" of European modern artists. The language of the senses ("stimulation," "illumination," "energy") and of the market ("enrichment" and "wealth of resources") were again and again invoked to describe the value of African sculpture. Barnes wrote in *The Art of Henri-Matisse* (1933), for example, "The stimulus and illumination which European artists received a few years ago from the work of African sculptures long unknown, widened their horizons and brought them new insight and a new access of energy."⁸ These authors used such terms as part of a narrative of modern artists' "rediscovery"—Barnes even used the alarming term "recapturing"—of African sculpture in European museums in the early twentieth century.⁹ *Primitive Negro Sculpture* ends with the chapter titled "Its Relation to Contemporary Art," reciting a theme that Barnes, Guillaume, and Munro often returned to as both the origin and the proof of African sculpture's value.

The transactions in Barnes's artistic economy, however, flowed one way, with African sculpture enriching modern European artists. In a 1924 article for *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, Barnes wrote, "Those artists [Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Brancusi, Klee, etc.] acknowledge freely the great debt they owe to the black savage of a thousand and more years ago."¹⁰ In addition to the offensiveness of the terminology "black savage," the absurdity of this statement is that, of course, no one can ever *actually* pay a debt of a thousand years ago. The one-sidedness of this exchange is made explicit in both Barnes's and Guillaume's insistence that good African art is always "pure," that is, art created before the moment of contact with the West that they believed marked its decline. Under such imagined conditions, how could

Picasso ever pay back the artistic debt he owed to African sculptors? The "art value" that African sculpture carried in Barnes's particular economy could thus only be used for the benefit of modern European and American painting and sculpture. Art historian Partha Mitter has diagnosed what he calls a "Picasso manqué syndrome" in Western art history: when a European artist appropriated African forms, he was deemed a genius, but if an African artist adopted Western forms, his art was called inauthentic or belated.¹¹

At the foundation, Barnes's ensembles both replicated and challenged these narratives. Notably, while African sculpture had previously been shown in ethnographic or natural history museums, Barnes was among the early Western collectors to show African sculpture in an art gallery and the first to do so in a permanent display. At the same time, primitivism always remained central to his thinking. It could even be said that Barnes restaged Picasso's Trocadéro encounter in Room 22, where two of Picasso's painted heads from 1907, likely studies for *Femmes d'Alger*, hang near two figures from Kota reliquary monuments and flank a wall vitrine of African sculpture (fig. 3). As the art historian Joshua Cohen has shown, at the Trocadéro Picasso would have seen mounted Kota reliquary sculptures that bear features similar to his new work from that year.¹² Cohen's careful research is a surprisingly recent and key intervention, since establishing what European modernists actually saw mitigates against art history's ongoing tendency to deny or avoid African art's influence by shrouding these relationships in vague generalities. Barnes himself often made use of these oversimplifications, since it is unlikely that he would have known what sculpture Picasso actually saw. But when Barnes hung the Kota works from his collection near the Picassos, he did ask viewers to look carefully at their formal similarities. Picasso's masklike heads share the color palette of the Kota statuary's warm brown wood, copper, and brass assemblage; the painted and sculpted faces are similarly geometric, rendered in quadrants with protruding, sharply defined rectangular noses and circles of concentric convex and concave rings for eyes. Barnes created displays to show African sculpture's relationship to European avant-garde primitivism. In doing so, he created a radically different experience for his viewer than had Picasso in *Femmes d'Alger*.

Barnes's vitrines may now appear old-fashioned, but in fact he installed his galleries as a modern antidote to the dimly lit ethnographic displays of Picasso's Trocadéro encounter.¹³ The Kota works are isolated, mounted on wood, and hung like paintings, which profoundly alters them from their original form as reliquaries.¹⁴ It also transports the sculptures from the type of dense, dark installation that terrified Picasso at the Trocadéro. Made over



into “art” in the ensembles, the Kota statuary assemblages served the new modernist paradigm that Barnes was promoting. In his view, the art values of “ancient” Africa were to pave the way for American art. Barnes would later expand his “primitive” collection to include art as geographically diverse and multisensory as Native American pottery, textiles, and metal-work; Pennsylvania German decorative art; and the musical form of African American spirituals, which were sung and played on records in the galleries (fig. 4). Barnes believed that these “primitive” arts could provide American artists both with new abstract forms and with sources for energy and vitality. Moreover, these diverse forms, starting with African sculpture, would train American viewers to properly see and appreciate the new developments in modern art.

MAKING AFRICAN SCULPTURE INTO “ART”

If Barnes and Guillaume initially formed the collection in conversation with contemporary European artistic practices, it soon became a hub for the ongoing American conversation on art, race, and modernity. Here, Barnes’s most important partners were the writers and editors Charles Johnson and Alain Locke, both influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Barnes and Guillaume argued that African sculpture had been to modern artists in Paris what Greek art had been to Renaissance artists in Italy.¹⁵ Barnes then extended this idea to argue that Western art was seeded with African influences through Egyptian art.¹⁶ African American artists and writers had previously established a parallel narrative for the Harlem Renaissance. The Philadelphia sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968), for example, created works in the 1910s and 1920s that showed a visual continuity among African, Egyptian, and other classical influences.¹⁷

Barnes’s campaign to categorize African sculpture as “art” was of a piece with the concerns of numerous collectors and critics in the early 1920s. With the sudden interest in African sculpture, many experts were anxious to establish it permanently within the category of art rather than as simply a passing trend. Locke worried that “having passed, however, through a period of neglect and disesteem during which it was regarded as crude, bizarre, and primitive, African art is now in danger of another sort of misconstruction, that of being taken up as an exotic fad and a fashionable amateurish interest.”¹⁸ In a moment when the prices for African sculpture were exponentially

Opposite: Fig. 3. Room 22, South Wall (detail). Above the case of African sculpture are two heads by Picasso.



Fig. 4. Room 18, East Wall, showing two portraits by Amedeo Modigliani and Pennsylvania furniture and metalwork

rising, the anxiety was that it not be treated within the fluctuating market of commodity fads but rather in terms of the more stable economy of “art value.” As Locke wrote, African art had to become “Art with a capital A.”¹⁹

A 1923 editorial in *Opportunity* complained that “the Museum of Natural History in New York has a collection of African Negro Art valued at a half-million dollars, the gift of the Belgian government. The Smithsonian Institute in Washington has an equally fine collection which has attracted as little interest. These are tagged and catalogued precisely enough, but meaninglessly. They are curiosities rather than art, relics of a dead past rather than symbols of the life of a living race.”²⁰ The author here distinguished between the “meaningless” value of “a half-million dollars” in a natural history museum in comparison to the artistic value, which reflected an artwork’s status as the “symbol of the life of a living race.” This text depends on two assumptions: first, that different types of exhibitions produce value differently, and second, that “art value” is more important than monetary value. The following year, a 1924 editorial on Barnes in the same journal described the inverse effects of African sculpture in the context of his art gallery: “[Barnes] was the first and is distinctly the last word in Primitive African Art and his pieces, the rarest of their kind—exquisite, exotic, distinctive—once casually valued at fifty thousand dollars, are becoming invaluable.”²¹ While the term “invaluable” implies great value, it also denotes a shift from a market-commodity economy, in which objects have a specific monetary value, to a kind of transcendent art economy. In 1924, Barnes described the importance of wresting African art away from anthropologists so that these works could inspire modern Western artists: “At the critical moment . . . the treasures of Negro sculpture were recaptured from the anthropologist and the antiquarian, and from them was derived a new impetus toward creative work in plastic art, in music and in poetry.”²² Barnes, in parallel to the editors at *Opportunity*, worked to engage viewers with a range of “art values” that they might attribute to objects in ethnographic displays.

For Barnes, the “art value” of African sculpture was established definitively within his scientific theory of aesthetics. In his systematic account of how to see works of art, Barnes brought together, for example, an African sculpture, a wrought-iron ladle, and an oil painting as comparable according to principles of light, line, color, and form (see fig. 3). According to this method, seemingly disparate objects were subject to comparison. Barnes’s gallery space thus became akin to the capitalist marketplace, in which all objects are made commensurate—albeit in this case through their formal properties rather than monetary currency.

MAKING AFRICAN SCULPTURE INTO ART AS PHOTOGRAPHS

These negotiations over art—and value—are particularly evident in the photography of Barnes’s African sculpture collection during his lifetime and for some years beyond. In general, Barnes fiercely maintained that it was impossible to understand or appreciate the art in his collection through the medium of photography. For the African sculpture, however, he not only allowed but commissioned photographs, and actively encouraged their circulation. The photographs illustrated publications by the Barnes Foundation as well as a number of important African American and European magazines and journals devoted to art and literature.²³ Paradoxically, this photographic campaign was meant to persuade the public that African sculpture was exactly the kind of art that was impossible to reproduce photographically.²⁴ As these images were embedded, juxtaposed, and described in various publications, though, they enabled a broad range of interpretations and debates, which reflected the foundation’s own conceptual framing but also extended beyond it. The publication of these dialogues provided key interstitial mechanisms through which authors and artists across Africa and the African diaspora participated in modernist Europe’s engagement with African art, but also remobilized it toward their own decolonizing projects and formations of “Black” modernism.

The composition of the standard Barnes collection photograph clearly supported this promotion of the high “art value” of African sculpture. The images primarily show the works individually framed against a white or black background (fig. 5). Although light reflects relatively evenly across the surface

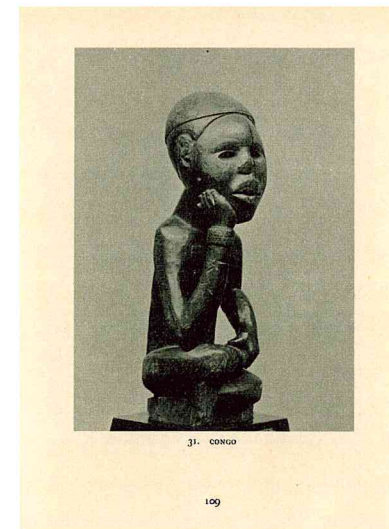


Fig. 5. “Congo,” from Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926), pl. 31. The work is currently attributed to an unidentified Kongo artist.

of the sculpture, it appears to come from the upper left-hand corner of the composition: an established convention for the photography of European classical art. The photographs were shot at eye level, putting the sculpture on par with the viewer. They also often provide a glimpse of the sculpture's elevation on a pedestal. The individualization and clarity of the images work to visually remove the stigma of objects associated with the clutter of old curiosity cabinets, or with more recent ethnographic museums (like the Trocadéro), and to further the argument for the "art value" of these objects. The art historian Wendy Grossman has argued that this style of photography, which discretely framed each sculpture and was seen early in the century in the German scholar Carl Einstein's book *Negerplastik* (1915), was crucial to the process of translating these objects into a modernist context. She writes, "In this paradigm, the unfamiliar is contained within a knowable autonomous art frame and as such becomes for Western modernism a means of possessing and appropriating objects with profoundly different meaning in the cultures from which they are extricated."²⁵ These photographs functioned for modernist critics not simply as documentary reproductions but as important mediators between African sculpture and modern European art.

If various writers were eager for the elevation of African sculpture to the alternative economy of artistic value, they diverged widely on how they thought it should participate in that economy. Very quickly, the position of many members of the Harlem Renaissance diverged from that of Albert Barnes. In 1924 the "African Art Edition" of *Opportunity* was the first publication to feature photographs of his African sculpture collection, and it opens with an editorial that casts the value of these sculptures in a light quite distinct from that of Barnes. One of the journal's editors, likely Charles Johnson, described the importance of Barnes's collection: "Soon primitive Negro art will invade this country as it has invaded Europe. It is inevitable. And there will come with it a new valuation of the contribution of Negroes, past and yet possible, to American life and culture."²⁶ The author's evocation of "Negro art" that "invades" the United States poses the sculptures as active agents rather than as passive objects that are "discovered" or "recaptured" by European artists and collectors. The editorial forecasts a new, non-monetary type of value for African sculpture, a value that would provide contemporary African Americans with a kind of cultural capital rather than create an unpayable debt for white artists.

And while Locke, like Barnes and Guillaume, argued for a common set of aesthetic principles by which objects could be compared, he argued for this assessment so that African sculpture in and of itself could be valued: "As a

product of African civilization, Negro art is a peculiarly precious thing . . . it is one of the few common elements between such highly divergent types of culture as the African and European, and offers a rare medium for their fair comparison."²⁷ This passage mobilizes the language of the marketplace with the terms "products" and "fair comparison," but Locke's cultural marketplace is one of exchange, in contrast to Barnes and Guillaume's construction of it as a site of enrichment for Western artists. Locke continued to shift toward recognizing the particularity of African art and calling for its more active role in African American cultural life. In a 1926 essay surrounded by photographs of the Barnes Foundation's sculptures, he described the modernist "discovery" of African sculpture in Europe.²⁸ Using quotes around "discovered," he provided a subtle but savvy intervention against Barnes's emphasis on the genius of European modernist artists and collectors as "discoverers." Locke shifted his focus to the cultural and artistic value the sculpture offered to Africans or, more often, to an African diasporic community. The term "Negro" in Barnes's writing often collapsed the identities of African artists (whom he believed to be ancient) and contemporary African American artists: he described them all as "artists in life," implying that they drew on the same set of racially bound creative resources.²⁹ Locke famously wrote of the potential role of African sculpture for African diasporic artists:

If the forefathers could so adroitly master these mediums, why not we? And there may also come to some creative minds among us, hints of a new technique to be taken as the basis of a characteristic expression in the plastic and pictorial arts; incentives to new artistic idioms as well as to a renewed mastery of these older arts. African sculpture has been for contemporary European painting and sculpture just such a mine of fresh motifs, just such a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression, and surely, once known and appreciated, this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest.³⁰

Like Barnes, Locke used an essentializing logic when he argued for African sculpture's special influence on its "blood descendants." But he did so to reroute the value of African sculpture from primarily serving contemporary European and American artistic genius (which often meant white artists) to serving as a generative cultural and artistic inheritance specifically for African Americans.³¹

THE USES OF MODERNISM

Both Barnes and Locke promoted African sculpture as having transcendent “art values” but to different purposes. Barnes believed that African sculpture would be a key source of heritage for African Americans but tended to praise and collect the works of white European artists who had “discovered” African art in Europe. Locke used the identification between African art and European modernism to appropriate the energy of practices surrounding modernism in the service of his own goal of advancing African American culture. Literary scholar Jeremy Braddock has shown that Barnes’s and Locke’s subtly discrete positions in the early 1920s solidified and turned into an actual conflict when Locke worked to create a Harlem museum of African art in 1927. While his efforts to raise funds were interrupted by the 1929 stock market crash, the process of creating an initial traveling exhibition that would generate income for the museum forced Locke to formulate a more precise position on how African art should and could produce meaning in the United States. Curator Yaëlle Biro’s research shows that most African works exhibited in art galleries and museums in the United States in the early 1910s and 1920s were purchased through Paul Guillaume. This meant that his particular modernist aesthetic criteria, which emphasized figural sculpture, profoundly shaped what was shown in US art venues.³² In contrast, Locke planned to purchase works directly from the Belgian Raoul Blondiau, whose collection included more functional objects such as cups, bowls, throne stools, musical instruments, staffs, scepters, and weaponry—for which it was more difficult to see a direct connection to European primitivism. According to the art historian Helen M. Shannon’s calculations, only 15 percent of the Blondiau collection consisted of the anthropomorphic sculptures prized by Guillaume and the modernist avant-garde.³³ Braddock argues that this collection’s variety and clear origins in particular craft traditions helped Locke “disarticulate the African work from modernist interpretations”³⁴ and see their value in a new way. He increasingly imagined them outside the categories in which Western collectors had thus far framed them: as ethnographic curiosities, on the one hand, or as source material for modern European art, on the other.

From the perspective of Barnes and Guillaume, however, Locke’s collection and his new emphasis on the particular craft and cultural traditions of Africa put at risk the “art value” that they had worked so hard to secure. Barnes Foundation teacher Thomas Munro argued that Locke’s initial traveling exhibit was of “handicrafts” and deserved “neither the word ‘primitive,’ nor ‘African,’ nor ‘art.’”³⁵ Locke’s reply was his most striking rebuff of the Barnes Foundation. He accused Barnes of instrumentalizing his African art

collection in the service of promoting his collection of modern art and his aesthetic method rather than appreciating it on its own terms: “The arbitrary distinction between art and handicraft is a vicious misinterpretation of African art. The distinction did not exist in that culture itself, and recognition of that fact is basic in the competent study and appreciation of African art. . . . Certainly it is at least as legitimate a modern use of African art to promote it as key to African culture and as a stimulus to the development of Negro art as to promote it as a side exhibit to modernist painting and to use it as a stalking-horse for a particular school of aesthetics.”³⁶ Importantly, Locke introduced the possibility of “modern” cultural uses and meanings for African art rather than keeping it cordoned off as always buried in a deep past.

Locke’s accusation—that despite Barnes’s circulation of photographs of African art, his writing about it, his many public talks on it, and its place decorating the façade of the foundation’s building, he ultimately used “it as a side exhibit to modernist painting”—hit a nerve with Barnes. After this dispute and amid others, he granted fellowships to the poet Gwendolyn Bennett and the painter Aaron Douglas in 1929, both of whom had been featured in Locke’s anthology *The New Negro*, first published in 1925. Douglas himself cited *Survey Graphic*’s special issue “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” in which the Barnes Foundation’s African sculpture collection was featured, as his impetus to move from Topeka, Kansas, to New York City to participate in the renaissance there.³⁷ During the years leading up to and after his fellowship studying art at the Barnes Foundation, he would produce some of the most iconic and innovative modernist visual depictions of African sculpture. Douglas’s romantic portrayals, which showed African sculpture as a wellspring for modernism, would seem to align with Barnes’s own vision (fig. 6). Yet, Barnes did not collect any of Douglas’s work, although it was clearly modern and cosmopolitan in its use of primitivism. Indeed, despite Barnes’s active participation in Harlem Renaissance publications and events, the only African American artist whose work he displayed was that of the self-taught artist Horace Pippin, who worked outside these circles, and whom Barnes understood as a true “primitive” who “showed no evidence of borrowing from any old or modern artist.”³⁸ This disjunction may point to the central problem of Barnes’s categorization of “Black art,” celebrating its virtues when he believed it to be in the purely “primitive” mode but less attuned to Black modernism.

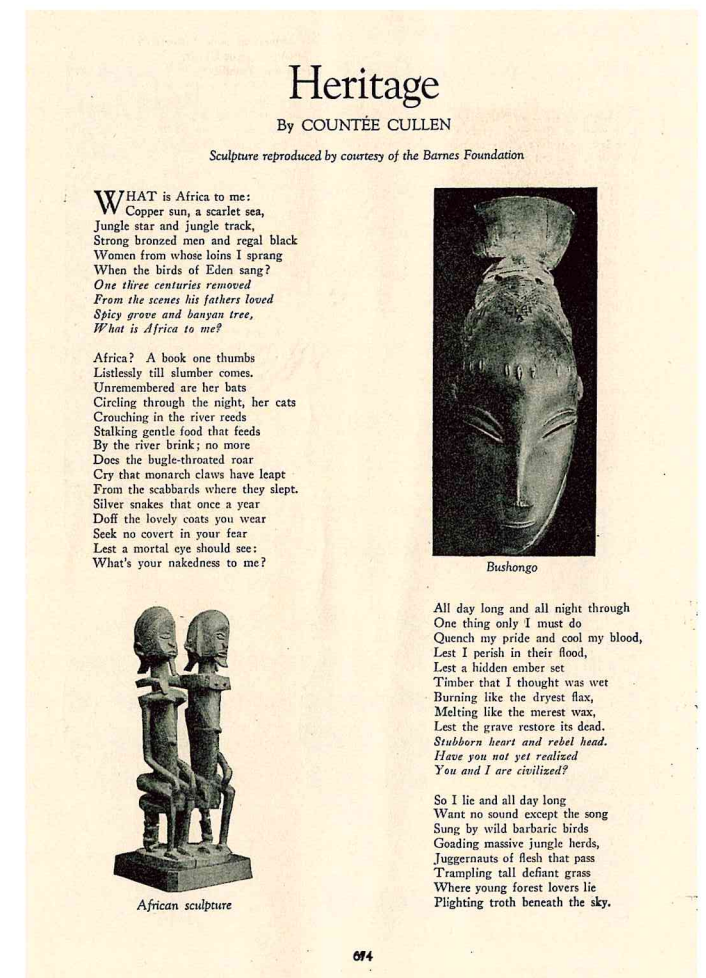


Fig. 6. Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979). *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 73 × 80 in. (185.4 × 203.2 cm). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library

WHAT IS AFRICA TO ME? AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORIC USES OF THE BARNES COLLECTION

Anticipating a later generation of African diasporic artists who would feel limited by Locke's emphasis on African heritage, the poet Countee Cullen asked a startling question of the Barnes collection with his well-known query, "What is Africa to me?" Cullen first published his poem "Heritage" in "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," with its stanzas surrounded by images of the Barnes Foundation's African sculpture collection (fig. 7). The juxtaposition of words and images cannily complicates both Barnes's and Locke's positions. Cullen traced an African American man's conflicted relationship to a memory of Africa that was embedded in Western contexts like Barnes's art galleries or books. Cullen's poem questions:

Fig. 7. Countee Cullen, "Heritage," in "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (March 1925): 674. At top is a mask surmounted by a bowl (A106) now identified as by the Bouaflé Master (Guro, 1867–1899). At bottom is a Dogon seated couple (A197) from the late nineteenth–early twentieth century.



One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove and banyan tree,
What is Africa to me?

.....
Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly till slumber comes.³⁹

The poem describes an African American man who, despite being Black, does not have access to the same heritage as an African from the continent. The speaker describes African sculpture as "Quaint, outlandish heathen gods / Black men fashion out of rods."⁴⁰ This rejection of "heathen gods"

throws the illustrations of the Barnes Foundation's sculptures into an ambivalent relationship with the text. Cullen's poem shows how the contexts within which he encountered African sculpture had always already been shaped by the goals and values of modernist collectors, poets, and anthologists.⁴¹ The poem describes an encounter with African art that unsettles not only Barnes's idea of African Americans' unmediated relationship to African sculpture but also Locke's belief in its direct potential to inspire African American artists.

Barnes encouraged a range of artists, students, critics, and intellectuals to see his art galleries. He also promoted the use of his photographs of African sculpture to illustrate not only his own essays but also other articles in "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," as well as other publications. In doing so, his collection catalyzed social and creative processes, and produced values that exceeded and even contradicted his own.

This essay has stayed close to the Barnes Foundation and its immediate circle, but its book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* and the Harlem Renaissance publications circulated widely to frame and participate in key transnational dialogues. Through the photographs especially, debates about what African sculpture could and should mean as "art" extended to African and African diasporic artists and intellectuals. As Cohen has shown, the Black, South African, avant-garde artist Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002) described his discovery in 1936 of *Primitive Negro Sculpture* in a Cape Town library as his impetus to engage with modernism and move to Paris. After reading it, Mancoba wrote, he wanted "to participate in the great universal debate where Africa, though present by its ancient sculptural masterpieces in the possession of collectors and museums and in the opinion of so many European thinkers and artists, had nobody to speak for it."⁴² *Primitive Negro Sculpture* provided Mancoba with a common visual vocabulary and entry point into a dialogue with other modernists in Europe and Africa. In a perhaps surprising parallel to Cullen's poem, Mancoba, an urban-based African artist, also "discovered" African art as fragments recontextualized in the Barnes Foundation's book. But he saw this as a chance to grapple with his heritage, which he understood as entangled with colonial modernity and European modernism. He used the collection photographs to inspire new techniques for pattern and abstraction in his sculpture and painting, and to connect to and engage with indigenous African cultural heritage while also "ensuring the international currency of [his] visual language."⁴³

Three years later, in 1939, the Serer Senegalese poet, philosopher, and future prime minister of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001),

described his discovery of *Primitive Negro Sculpture* as central to his own, very different thinking. A key founder of the francophone Négritude movement, which developed in dialogue with the Harlem Renaissance and sought to raise "Black consciousness," Senghor has been criticized for sharing the book's romantic and racialized construction of *art nègre*. As Cohen has argued, however, Senghor also used *Primitive Negro Sculpture* and the value it conferred on African sculpture via European modernism to center Africa's place within global modernity, to create new connections and conversations across the African diaspora, and to stand for a precolonial African sovereignty that could motivate an African "renaissance."⁴⁴

Artists and thinkers as diverse as Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, Countee Cullen, Aaron Douglas, Ernest Mancoba, and Léopold Sédar Senghor described their "discovery" of African sculpture on a visit to the Barnes Foundation galleries or in one of its related publications, all of which premised African sculpture's value on the development of European modernism. Yet they each used the value of that connection for their own purposes. The Barnes Foundation's walls may appear static, but this collection and its display—both in person and through photographs—produced not a fixed statement by Barnes but a dynamic conversation that reverberated across the African diaspora through Europe, the United States, and Africa.

NOTES

1. For an extensive history on how African sculpture entered the collection, its portrayal in the building's architectural details, and its relationship to the "New Negro" movement, see Christa Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of L'Art Nègre and the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Skira Rizzoli; Philadelphia: Barnes Foundation, 2015).
2. For a broader history of African art venues in US collections, see Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, eds., *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).
3. There is now a large body of critical literature questioning the colonial assumptions and elisions of how artists, art historians, and critics have related modern European and

- "tribal art." This critique of primitivism particularly emerged in response to the 1984 exhibit "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. See for example, James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73, no. 4 (April 1985): 164–77; and Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34, no. 102 (Fall 1985): 45–70.
4. See Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*.
5. A key early exhibition that Barnes was aware of and that connected European modernism to African sculpture in the United States was Marius de Zayas and Alfred Stieglitz's 1914 *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art*. De Zayas

claimed it as “the first [exhibition] ever held presenting Negro sculpture as Art,” but he described this art as the “product of the ‘Land of Fright.’” De Zayas, “Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art, 1914,” in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack D. Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 70.

6. Picasso quoted in André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 10–11. It is worth noting that Picasso's account of his relationship to African art was slippery and changed over time. See Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 7–9.

7. Simon Gikandi has critiqued the “anxiety of influence” by which Picasso, and many curators, critics, and art historians after him, emphasized Africa as a source for powerful, unconscious “magic” forces but denied its formal influence in the making of modernism. Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455–80.

8. Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia, *The Art of Henri Matisse* (New York: Scribners, 1933), 16.

9. Albert C. Barnes, “Negro Art, Past and Present,” *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* 4, no. 41 (May 1926): 148. (The journal is hereafter cited as *Opportunity*.) The journal was published by the National Urban League from 1923 through 1949.

10. Albert Barnes, “The Temple,” *Opportunity* 2, no. 17 (May 1924): 140.

11. Partha Mitter, “Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 537.

12. Joshua I. Cohen, *The Black Art Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism across Continents* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 65–67. For the potential influence of the Kota sculpture on Picasso's *Demoiselles*, see also Blier, *Picasso's Demoiselles*, 122–25.

13. Barnes, for example, emphasized his desire for modern galleries illuminated by natural light. Albert C. Barnes, “The Building for the Barnes Foundation,” typescript to Paul Phillipe Cret, November 29, 1922, Cret 1922, folder 6, Barnes Foundation Archive.

14. For a history of these works, see the entry by Alisa LaGamma in Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, 202–4, cat. 39.

15. Barnes, “Negro Art, Past and Present”; Paul Guillaume, “The Discovery and Appreciation of Primitive Negro Sculpture,” *Les arts à Paris* 12 (May 1926): 12–14.

16. Barnes, “Negro Art, Past and Present.”

17. Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 109–31.

18. Alain Locke, “A Note on African Art,” *Opportunity* 2, no. 17 (May 1924): 134.

19. Locke, 136.

20. “The Creative Art of Negroes Illustrated,” editorial, *Opportunity* 2, no. 17 (May 1924): 240.

21. “Dr. Barnes,” editorial, *Opportunity* 2, no. 17 (May 1924): 133.

22. Barnes, “Negro Art, Past and Present,” 148.

23. Barnes encouraged featuring the photographs in international journals such as *Der Querschnitt*, *Ex Libris*, and *Les arts à Paris*.

Albert C. Barnes to Charles Johnson, May 8, 1924, Presidents' Files, Albert C. Barnes Correspondence, Barnes Foundation Archives.

24. See my argument in Alison Boyd, “The Visible and Invisible: Circulating Images of the Barnes Foundation Collection,” in *Images of the Art Museum: Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology*, ed. Eva Maria Troelenberg and Melania Savino (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 133–54.

25. Wendy A. Grossman, “African Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Photography at the Crossroads,” in *Die Schau des Fremden: Ausstellungskonzepte zwischen Kunst, Kommerz und Wissenschaft*, ed. Cordula Grewe (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006), 334.

26. “Dr. Barnes,” editorial.

27. Locke, “Note on African Art,” 136.

28. Alain Locke, “The Art of the Ancestors,” in “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” special issue, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (March 1925): 673.

29. Albert C. Barnes to James Weldon Johnson, January 25, 1924, Presidents' Files, Albert C. Barnes Correspondence, Barnes Foundation Archives.

30. Locke, “Art of the Ancestors.”

31. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has argued that Locke used African art's international renown via European modernism to strategically serve his political goals for the Harlem Renaissance. Gates, “Harlem on Our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 1–12.

32. Yaelle Biro, “The John Quinn Collection of African Art and Its Photographic Album by Charles Sheeler,” in *African Art, New York and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Biro (Belgium: Tribal Art Magazine, 2012), 44–49.

33. Helen M. Shannon, “The Blondiau-Theater Arts Collection of Primitive African Art,” in Biro, *African Art*, 52.

34. Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 198.

35. Thomas Munro, “Good and Bad Negro Art,” *Nation*, March 2, 1927: 242.

36. Alain Locke, “African Art in America,” *Nation*, March 16, 1926: 290.

37. Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 13.

38. Barnes quoted in “Horace Pippin, Negro Artist, 57, Dies,” obituary, *New York Times*, July 7, 1946.

39. Countee Cullen, “Heritage,” in “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” 674.

40. Cullen, 675.

41. In Braddock's view, the poem insists that the “conditions of availability” of Africa always depend on a recovery of African sculpture and texts within the context of modernist spaces like the Barnes Foundation; *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, 190.

42. Speech by Mancoba at Nedbank head office, Johannesburg May 13, 1996, quoted in Cohen, *Black Art Renaissance*, 127–28.

43. Cohen, 134.

44. Cohen, 166.