

INTRODUCTION

Juxta:Position

The Aesthetics of Reduction

1335Mabini Gallery in cooperation with AsianArt:Future, Hong Kong

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The Aesthetics of Reduction

As a collector I was often fascinated by the fact that artists from different continents, with very distinct cultural heritages may employ very similar aesthetics, in very different times.

Particularly interesting I found the spread of then use of the aesthetics of reduction. I am not looking at the use of those aesthetic principles from a scholarly point of view, my lack of knowledge of the teachings on art would not allow that.

I am looking at pieces of art from different backgrounds and periods, searching for aesthetic interaction. Lorenz Homberger, for many years curator of the Africa and Oceania departments of Rietberg Museum/Zürich once observed (in 2009): "...because anthropologists of art have discovered very valuable things about ideals of beauty and aesthetic vocabulary in their investigations. And these have largely been ignored to this day".¹

Just examples for such interaction, the common aesthetic vocabulary, like minimalism, the use of negative space, the absence of decoration or clutter, and in general: reduction will be shown in the following essay on the aesthetics of Cordillera and 20th/21st century art.

1335Mabini and AsianArt:Future are pleased to present an exhibition juxtaposing Philippine 20th century abstract art and Cordillera (Ifugao) traditional art, with a view to allow you to gain your own experience. It is not about searching for traces of Cordillera art in the abstract art. It is about presenting the aesthetic vocabulary, using the same principles, in different times, from a quite different cultural background.

Some might find the concept odd, but then: "Every exhibition, if it is to have an impact, should take risks".²

¹ Visual Encounters, Catalogue for the exhibition at Fondation Beyeler, 2009, p. 26.

² Steven Hopper, Foreword to the catalogue to Visual Encounters, Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel 2009, p. 10

Traditional, aka primitive, tribal art from the Philippine Cordilleras, and Philippine abstract art from the 20th and 21st century at first sight and from a viewpoint of the history of art may not have much in common. Yet: they do, the aesthetics of reduction to the essence. Simplicity, directness, discipline, the reduction to the essence, understatement, showing the hidden reality, asf.

Whilst there are Filipino artists who have clearly been directly influenced by traditional Cordillera art, like Gaston Damag (an Ifugao himself), Eduardo Olbes, Bencab, and others, it can be assumed that many more have had some inspirations, subconscious or conscious. Whatever: the commonalities in respect of the expression are clearly visible, and will be discussed further in this catalogue.

The commonalities and potential direct influence in the Filipino realm has, to my knowledge not been subject to much research and discussion yet. However, the aesthetic principles of traditional Cordillera art have been covered by Joaquin Palencia (pieces from his collection will be exhibited) in two notable articles for Arts of Asia and Tribal Art magazine in 1989 and 1998 respectively, and in an essay of Marian Pastor Roces for the catalogue of the exhibition Philippines: archipel des échanges at Musée Quai Branly/Paris in 2013.³ The aesthetics of the traditional Cordillera art in relation to "modern art" will be discussed more in detail in a separate essay, see p. XX.

Ramon Villegas, the leading Philippine writer and expert encouraged me to look at the artworld in a holistic, to try to understand the pieces from different ages and background outside of the boxes. On the occasion of a visit to his gallery I had observed the wide range of publications on all sorts of art which he kept there, and Ramon just made remarked that it was all the same anyway.

In order to provide context, I will first highlight the age of Primitivism in Europe and the research thereto which shed light on the direct influence of the primitive art or "arts premiers" (once called the art of the "art of the savages", or in respect of the African part also "negro art") from Africa and Oceania, followed by some references to other areas where we can find the commonalities in terms of artistic principles. In the essay which follows, we will examine the principles of traditional Cordillera art a bit more in detail, using the pieces exhibited and others from the collection of AsianArt:Future as examples.

Prof. Ambeth R. Ocampo will then examine the aesthetic relationship with the works of leading Filipino artists, the principles applied and their connection with those listed above, discussing with some who are still amongst us, and their work, especially the works exhibited. The artists covered include H.R. Ocampo, Lee Aguinaldo, Cesar Legaspi, Gus Albor, Arturo Luz, Lao Lianben, Fernando Zobel. That is an arbitrary selection,

³ Monbrison, de, Alvina, et al., Philippines: An Archipelago of Exchange, Paris: Musée de Quai Branly

we know, many other artists would have qualified. But the purpose of this exhibition is not to prove an overall view, it's meant to be food for thought.

The approach in each segment is not to subordinate the Cordillera traditional art, or any primitive art, to the viewpoint of "modern" or "fine" art perspective, which with most viewers will be familiar, but to allow both sources to be looked at on the same level.

That means also to avoid looking at the Cordillera pieces shown from the perspective of their anthropological, ceremonial and functional background and use, through undeniably there was such ceremonial and functional background, which is widely discussed in many publications. ⁴

Context: Primitivism: Influence of "primitive" art on European art of the early/mid 20th century

However, the influence of primitive, or tribal art on certain schools of modern art in Europe is widely researched and discussed and was the subject of a number of exhibitions and publications, most notably the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York 1988 and William Rubin's accompanying catalogue "The Primitivism in 20th Century Art, the 2009 exhibition at Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, titled "Visual Encounters, Africa, Oceanic, and Modern Art, showing tribal masterpieces in the context of works of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Vassily Kandinsky, Georges Braque, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Fernand Léger, Paul Klee, Henri Rousseau, Constantin Brancusi, Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Mark Rothko.

Or the recent exhibition of Les Collections Barbier-Muller, 110 Years of Passion, on the occasion of the Biennale des Antiquaires, Grand Palace, Paris, 2017, showing pieces of tribal art from Africa and Oceania in the context of contemporary art of Baselitz, Jeff Koons and others,

Not all of the European artists were known to be influenced by primitive art. But where there was:

Such influence, or more broadly "inspiration", referred to as "Primitivism" took many different forms, and are often chronologically overlapping set of ideas. ⁵

Some of those influences and inspirations include:

Picasso, the story goes, visited the Africa gallery of the ethnographical Museum Trocadero in Paris somewhere in June 1907, and was thoroughly disgusted with what he saw and smelled, yet he could not leave for a considerable time – mesmerised by the magic of the

objects. And then we saw him including the distinct forms of tribal art, such as the African mask in "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)".

It is said that the use of the distinct forms do not just appear as quotes, borrowed features, but "prove Picasso's basic understanding in principle of the artistic principles of African Art. ⁶ "Picasso painted figures resembling Congo sculptures", wrote Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "and still lifes of the simplest form. His perspective in these works is similar to that of Cézanne". ⁷

Other artists were attracted by the simplicity and directness. Georges Braque, who is considered to be one of the founding fathers of cubism, once observed: "African masks opened a new horizon to me. They made it possible for me to make contact with instinctive things, with uninhibited feelings that went against the fake tradition {of late Western Illusionism, late 19th century} which I hated". ⁸

Constantin Brancusi, a leader of Modernism and representative of the Cubist style was admittedly also influenced by the works he saw at the Trocadero, and was emphasizing the need to find the "essence" of matters, the "reduction": "What my work is aiming at is, above all, realism: I pursue the inner, hidden reality, the very essence of objects in their own intrinsic fundamental nature...", and "The artist should know how to dig out the being that is within the matter" ⁹ possibly very much in line with Michelangelo's view: "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it". ¹⁰ The features of primitive sculptures of many tribes in Africa, Oceania, as well as the sculptures of the Cordillera peoples often appear to be "abstract", but Brancusi emphasized that "abstract is really most realistic. What is real is not appearance, but the essence of things". ¹¹

Primitive art is "was regarded, on the whole, as always more instinctive", "less bound by artistic convention and history, and as somehow closer to fundamental aspects of human existence". ¹² Paul Klee expressed the inspiration he was drawing from "primitive" art: "If my works sometimes produce a primitive expression, this primitiveness is explained by my discipline, which consists of reducing everything to a few steps. It is no more than economy; that is the ultimate awareness, which is to say the opposite of real primitiveness". ¹³

⁶ Ursula Seibold-Bultmann, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 26 April 2018,

⁷ Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, The Rise of Cubism, The documents of modern art; Wittenborn, Schultz, translated by Henry Aronson, notice by Robert Motherwell, New York, 1949. First published under the title Der Weg zum Kubismus, in 1920

⁸ Flam and Deutch, p. 428; Marrone FN 41.

⁹ <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-brancusi-constantin.htm>, p. 1.

¹⁰ see <http://www.brunomedicina.com/michelangelo-and-the-prisoner-in-the-stone/>

¹¹ Quoted in Kurer, Martin, Simplicity: Ifugao Sculpture. Power, Hong Kong University Press, 2018pp. 11 et seq.

¹² Rhodes, op. cit., p. 9.

¹³ Quoted in Rhodes, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁴ Quoted in Kosinski, Dorothy, ed., Henry Moore: Sculpting the 20th Century, Yale University Press, 2001

⁴ See bibliography

⁵ Colin Rhodes Primitivism and Modern Art, London 1994, p. 9.

Henry Moore, also a confessed visitor of the then Trocadero, looked at the parallels in a different way, mentioning that in studying pebbles, rocks, shells and bones, he was attempting to find what he called “nature’s principles of form and rhythm”. In case of his works it was also noted that the “object almost seems to grow out of an absent center.”¹⁴

The artistic use of negative space, which is a main feature of Mumuye (Nigeria) objects, as well as of a number of Cordillera pieces shown in the exhibit, is also found in the sculptures of Henry Moore¹⁵, Constantin Brancusi¹⁶, Alexander Archipenko, Jacques Lipchitz,, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon.¹⁷

More Context: Aesthetic principles in Japanese art and various peoples

The aesthetic principles discussed above transcend time and borders.¹⁸

We can find a very similar approach to aesthetics in many areas of Japanese art like Shibu/Shibuni (beauty of understatement), Kanso (simplicity, elimination of clutter), Seijaku (tranquillity), or Shizen (absence of pretense).

John Carpenter, Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese Art at the Metropolitan Museum/ New York referred a sculpture by the acetic and itinerant monk Mokuji Shonin, where a similar life force is generated from a single block of wood.¹⁹

We see the application of the same principles in the art of the autochthonous peoples of central Vietnam, of the Indonesian Nias people, from Sumba and Toraja, the Atauro from East Timor, or the Batak peoples of northern Sumatra.²⁰

Or in Africa, Seenufo, Mumuye, Fang, Lega and other peoples.²¹ Or in Micronesia, the Nukuoro peoples.²³

To sum up: There are a number of artists, and schools of artists in the West and other cultures of, in different periods, who have directly picked up elements of the aesthetic principles of tribal art, clearly visible in their works; others explained a more “indirect” influence in liking the power and simplicity, showing a way out of the period of “illusionism”, in other cases we know of a contact but not more; in yet other cases we can identify common traits or principles, similar choices, common vocabulary.

¹⁴ Quoted in Kosinski, Dorothy, ed., Henry Moore: Sculpting the 20th Century, Yale University Press, 2001

¹⁵ see overview in Kosinsky, op. cit.

¹⁶ see f.i. „Fish”, 1926, Tate Gallery; see also Leah Lembeck, Curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, quoted by Tanja M. Laden, quoted in LA Weekly, 9 August 2013

¹⁷ See more in detail: Kurer, Martin, Simplicity: Ifugao Sculpture, Power, Hong Kong University Press, 2018pp. 11 et seq.

¹⁸ See also Wahei Aoyama, Owner, Yufuku Gallery/Tokyo, in a foreword to a catalogue for TEFAF Maastricht, 2018 discussing the art of the Keisho School

¹⁹ See Kurer, op. cit. p. 12

²⁰ see Kurer, op. cit. p. 12

²¹ see Kurer, op. cit., p. 12

²³ see f.i. Nukuoro, Christian Kaufmann and Oliver Wick, ed. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013

Invitation to see Cordillera Art in the context

The Hong Kong based AsianArt:Future published, in the January/February 2017 edition of Asian Art Magazine, an article looking a bit more in detail into the art of the Cordilleras people and their counterparts in other parts of the world, pointing out the view that the quality of the pieces created by the former match the quality of the pieces of African and Oceanic tribal art which admittedly had the referenced influence.

However, the article did not cover or claim any parallels with Filipino 20th (and contemporary art). The same was explained in the catalogue to the exhibition: Simplicity.Ifugao Sculpture.Power, Traditional Philippine Cordillera Art, at Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery in 2017/2018.

This exhibition takes the study one step further, just in line with the exhibitions at the MOMA, at the Beyeler Foundation, by Barbier-Mueller, and others.

The Cross-Art-Lover, the Cross-Curator, Cross-Collector: Look at authentic pieces

The examination should not end with this list, it just should provide a starting point for an approach which has not been tried, to my knowledge, in respect of Filipino art. We are taking risks in opening this line of discussion, but maybe such will influence the view of Cordillera art.

Cross collecting enjoys good days, also in the tradition the famous collectors like Ernst Beyeler or the Barbier-Mueller family. Many artefacts from Africa and Oceania auctioned in Europe and the US are actually not acquired by tribal art collectors, but by collectors modern and contemporary art seeking the interaction described. We see a growing number of collectors in the Philippines seeking the same.

Traditional Cordillera art therefore is, in my view, not something reserved to the very small group of tribal art lovers understanding the ethnological, ceremonial and functional background of the pieces. True, there are a number of artefacts produced in the Cordilleras to be found in private spaces, but more often than not those are not authentic, meaning: In my view a “sound position is that an authentic object is made by indigeneous people for spiritual, ceremonial, social or utilitarian use within their living culture”.²³ Ramon N. Villegas shared this position. It is not just a question of age. Although pieces created after the 1950ties, when the traditional ceremonies basically disappear²⁴ will hardly be considered “authentic” can show fine skills of a carver, they were basically made for the tourist trade.

Some protection against non-authentic pieces (some call them the fakes, which is not always correct) can be derived from a C-14 test, which however test the material only and are not that precise anyway. But in the end it is all about quality, and an object which pretends to be, f.i., a “bulul”,

²³ Paleobree.com, a website by collectors, with references to views of Dr. Roy Sieber, the

²⁴ Anderson, Eric Moltzau and others, In the Shape of Tradition, Leiden, Zwartenkot Art Books, 2010