

# Masks and Faces

AN EXHIBITION AT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION EXPLORES THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN MODERNISM ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ART. BY JOHN DORFMAN



Hale Woodruff, *The Card Players*,  
1930, oil on canvas,  
23 1/2 x 29 3/8 in.

THE RISE OF African American art coincides with the rise of modernism. In the early 20th century, Americans of African descent found themselves, for the first time, able to pursue careers in art, albeit with great difficulty and without access to all the institutions and advantages that white artists did. Nonetheless, they persevered, and inevitably, whatever their training may have been, they came face to face with the radical new approaches to art that were being invented in Europe, especially in

Paris. For many black artists, Europe beckoned, if for no other reason than because it offered an alternative to American culture, which was deeply associated with racism and the squelching of opportunity for non-whites. Paris was more accepting of African Americans, at least in creative circles, than the U.S., and that applied to visual artists as well as writers and jazz musicians. But more importantly, European modernism offered new ways of seeing and creating, which were welcome at a time when Afri-





African Americans were seeking ways of representing themselves and their experiences, freeing themselves from the reductive depictions so common in traditional American art and Western art in general.

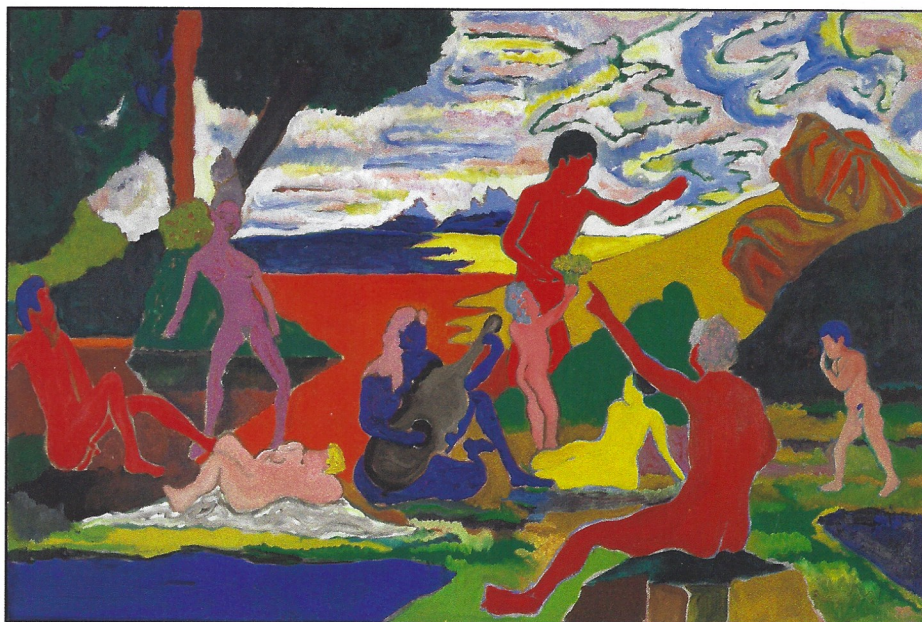
The fascinating results of the African American encounter with modernism and its reverberations down to the present time are the focus of an exhibition on view at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. "Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition" (through May 24) displays 72 works—paintings, prints, sculpture, photographs, and mixed-media pieces—by 54 artists (including some key non-African American modernists such as Matisse, Mondrian, and Picasso), chronicling the ways in which African American artists were influenced by avant-garde modernism, challenged its assumptions, and continue the dialogue with it today. "This exhibition shows the ways in which many African American artists draw on the substance of European art history to tell their own stories," says guest curator Adrienne L. Childs. "By exploring this terrain, we hope to enhance the narrative of modern

and contemporary art in America by presenting the compelling works born of these riffs and relations."

The Phillips Collection is a particularly appropriate venue for such an exhibition, as it is so closely identified with the effort to spread the gospel of modernism in this country. Dorothy Kosinski, Vradenburg



Clockwise from top left: Alma Thomas, *Watusi (Hard Edge)*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 47 5/8 x 44 1/4 in.; Mequitta Ahuja, *Xpect*, 2018, oil on canvas, 84 x 72 in.; Bob Thompson, *Homage to Nina Simone*, 1965, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 1/8 in.







Clockwise from top left: Henri Matisse, *Icarus*, plate VIII from the illustrated book *Jazz* (1947), pochoir, sheet: 16  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 25  $\frac{5}{8}$  in.; Moe Brooker, *The Eyes have it*, 1991, pastel, watercolor, and spray paint on paper, 41  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.; Carrie Mae Weems, *After Manet*, 2002 (printed 2015), chromogenic print, 31 x 31 in.

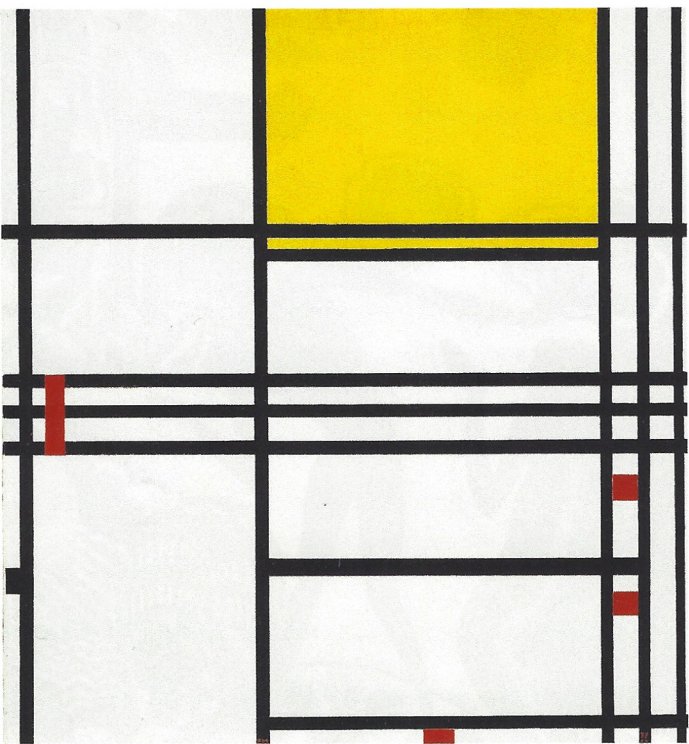


Director and CEO of The Phillips Collection, says, “We are proud to feature this groundbreaking exhibition at The Phillips Collection, the first museum of modern art in America. Through his support of living artists, our founder Duncan Phillips helped to broaden and shape discussions on modern art by displaying works from various times and places to tell a more comprehensive story.”

The story here dates back the the period around World War I, and one of the most interesting things about it is the fact that the birth of modernism had a great deal to do with the European discovery of so-called “primitive” art, especially the art of Africa. As is well known,

Picasso and others at the time were profoundly influenced by Sub-Saharan sculpture and the very non-European ways in which it represented the human body. Hale Woodruff moved to Paris in 1927, where he and the Harlem Renaissance intellectual Alain Locke would go shopping together for African art at flea markets. Woodruff recalled comparing these pieces with the modernist works he was seeing: “Then I saw the work of Picasso and I saw how Cézanne, Picasso, and the African had a terrific unique sense of form. The master I chiefly admired at that time was Paul Cézanne; then Picasso, who was certainly bolder and more courageous in his Cubist work. Then when I saw his painting which is now in the Museum of Modern Art called *Les Femmes d’Alger*—





Cubist-like girls with black masks on—the whole thing was clarified for me.” Some of the results of that clarification can be seen in Woodruff’s painting *The Card Players* (1930), in which the classic Cézanne sub-

ject is transmogrified with a heavily Cubistic approach and the faces of the players rendered so as to look like African masks.

Woodruff’s use of an African aesthetic in conjunction with Cubism can be seen as a reclamation, a self-alignment not only with modernism but with his own heritage. But while some African American artists saw modernism as an affirmation of their Africanness, others were—and are—uncomfortable with the modernist embrace of the “primitive,” seeing it as simplistic, ignorant, or even demeaning. In 2016, Sanford Biggers made a quilt, on view in the exhibition, titled *Negerplastik* (“Negro sculpture” in German) after an influential book by the early-20th-century German art historian Carl Einstein (whom Woodruff had read and been influenced by). In Biggers’ piece a form resembling a West African power figure is assimilated into an abstract textile design in a way that suggests the artist has mastery over the figure, that he has placed distance

Clockwise from top left: Piet Mondrian, *Painting No. 9*, 1939–42, oil on canvas, 31  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 29  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.; Janet Taylor Pickett, *And She was Born*, 2017, acrylic on canvas with collage 30 x 30 in.; Sanford Biggers, *Negerplastik*, 2016, repurposed antique quilt, cotton fabric fragments, tar, and glitter, 81 x 76  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.; David C. Driskell, *Still Life with Sunset*, 1966, oil on canvas, 48 x 32 in.







Clockwise from top left: Henri Matisse, *Interior with Egyptian Curtain*, 1948, oil on canvas, 45  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 35  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.; Winold Reiss, *African Phantasy: Awakening*, circa 1925, ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper, 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 14  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.; Elizabeth Catlett, *Ife*, 2002, mahogany, 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18 x 38 in.



between himself and it while at the same time embracing it. In a statement about the work, Biggers refers to modernism as “the language of the oppressor” but adds, “While my *Negerplastik* is a critique of sorts, I find some of it liberating. We often get bogged down about these ideas of authenticity and provenance and who made it, when it was done, and where it was from.”

The “riffs” of the exhibition’s title evoke jazz, which is not accidental; jazz itself was born of interaction between African American and European music, and it became a key motif in modernism. This explains the presence in the show of plates from Matisse’s “Jazz” series of prints (1947)

and Mondrian’s *Painting No. 9* (1939–42), from a period in which the Dutch-born artist was interested in rendering the rhythms of boogie-woogie piano in abstract graphic form. But riffing also refers to the creative variations made by contemporary African American artists on classic and influential works of European art. Mequitta Ahuja critiques the misogyny of *Les Femmes d’Alger* by repainting and reframing the picture and combining it with a self portrait in *Xpect* (2018), while Janet Taylor Pickett gives Matisse’s *Interior With Egyptian Curtain* (1948) a similar treatment in *And She Was Born* (2017), critiquing the French artist’s exoticizing appropriation of African motifs. And Carrie Mae Weems’ photograph *After Manet* (2002) replaces the women in *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* with young black girls whose relaxed, confident body language and steady gazes subvert the aggressive male gaze of the Manet painting. **A**