

Masterpieces from Central Africa
A review by Joshua Korenblat

In the deep heart of Africa, the once refined Admiral Kurtz slips into insanity. Death grasps him. In an instant of clarity before the end, he gasps, “The horror, the horror!” Those words come from *Heart of Darkness*, an intense novella by Joseph Conrad. For those unfamiliar with Central Africa, Admiral Kurtz’s lament has become shorthand for Africa’s bad news: poverty, disease, and war.

In his famous yet controversial novella, Conrad explored the vast, colonized region of Central Africa, once known as the Belgian Congo, Zaire, and now named The Democratic Republic of the Congo. Conrad weaves the dark jungle and the muddy river together into a universal metaphor for cruelty. The heart of darkness beats within all people, he says, but its primal pulse quickens in the Congo. Cultivated Europeans should take note of the ill-fated Admiral Kurtz.

Now flash over to Picasso. It's 1907, and his large painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* has shattered the world of art. Cubism rears its strange head in the fragmented, two-dimensional surface of the painting. The women from Avignon hardly look like women at all—their eggshell-pink faces seem hidden by stylized African masks. In order to access African art, Picasso had to visit the Anthropological Museum, which housed loot taken by European imperialists in Africa. Where Conrad found desolation, Picasso found inspiration. Ultimately, Picasso's innovations in cubism pale in comparison to his revolutionary exploration into Africa.

Masterpieces from Central Africa, the new exhibit at the Saint Louis Art Museum, leaves the viewer standing in Picasso's shoes. With war, poverty, and genocide in nearby Rwanda, the Congo has its share of horror, yet Central Africa has much to celebrate in terms of

culture. Beyond its contribution to modern European art, African art reigns in its own right as stunning and important work.

Culled from the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, the early works in this expansive collection of African art were originally looted by Belgian imperialists, many of whom brutally subjugated the peoples of the Congo, beginning in 1897. At the Tervuren Museum, the cultural products from Africa became untouched objects of mystery, artifacts of a distant place.

Here, however, the Art Museum has given the collection its proper designation. Africa produces art, not just artifacts. Europeans hang art on walls or prop art on pedestals; many Africans, meanwhile, use art for ceremony and ritual. Art plays a much more active, utilitarian role in African society. Recognizing this fact, the exhibit divides the work into three categories: art for life cycles, art for spiritual or religious ritual, and art for royalty.

African art is often figurative. Most of the works in the exhibit are either masks or sculptures, shaping and exaggerating the human form. Aesthetically, such pieces walk the tense line between description and abstraction. Nature provides the working medium. The majority of the masks are carved from wood, while the sculptures range from luminous ivory figures, small and polished, to wood and stone. Organic elements, such as ivory, feathers, pig's teeth, squirrel skulls, goat hair, and straw, are collaged onto the silent figures. Comprised of the earth, and sparingly painted in earthy colors, the art seems akin to an excavation. Yet it is beautifully crafted.

Among dozens in the Congo region, each tribe relies on a distinct style to convey their purpose. The Boa peoples, for instance, created masks with saucer-shaped ears. When worn in battle, these masks would make their owners invulnerable to their enemies. Painted ghostly

white, two masks by the Kongo peoples evoke an eerie naturalism with crescent eyes and pointed teeth, even as they maintain their otherworldly duties. Such a mask would be worn by the medicine man, to help retrieve the soul at the moment of death.

Some pieces are at once beautiful and suggestively violent, like the *nkisi nkondi*, small voodoo-like figures, which suffer from rows of iron nails plunged into their bodies. A royal double cup by the Luba peoples—elegantly sweeping, smoothly crafted—replaced the human cranium in a drinking ceremony.

Many of the most notable pieces come from rituals involving the induction into adulthood. For ceremonies involving circumcision, large wooden masks conjure spirits who serve symbolic and often practical purposes. Kakunga, a mammoth wood mask worn by the Suku peoples, evoked protective spirits on the last day of the circumcision ritual. With its overpowering, bulbous forehead, cavernous eyes, wild hair, and snarling teeth, the mask conveys its purpose immediately.

Other masks intermingle animal and human characteristics, such as the chameleon-like Kuba mask, which imbued its owner with invisibility. Other forms, such as the mask by the Mbjana or Nybaka peoples, express in concrete terms visions that can neither be seen nor heard. Two intersecting red lines are tattooed on its forehead, symbolizing the crossroads where spirits, having descended from the netherworld, meet in the natural world. In its simplicity, this compelling mask is a masterpiece.

With undeniable gravity, the frozen faces of kings, spirits, warriors, and mythological creatures all embody the rich and diverse cultures of the Congo. Picasso was one of the few European artists not to overlook the innovations of African art. Be like Pablo and peruse these illuminating masks from Central Africa before they head back to Belgium.

