H.W. JANSON, HISTORY OF ART
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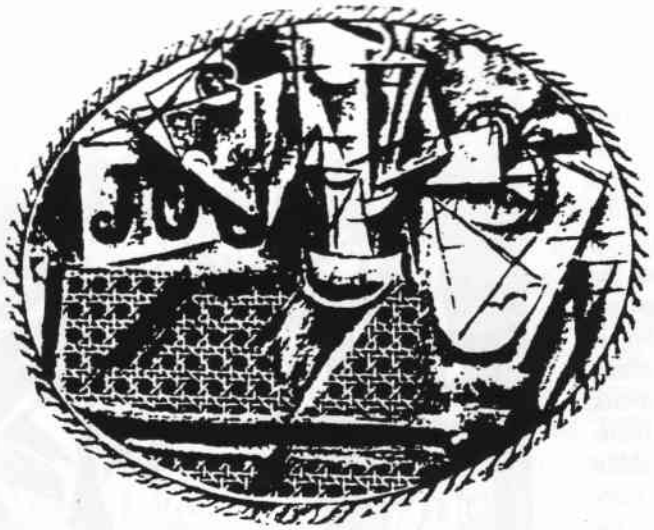
Well and good—but how are we to account for the varying *degrees* of abstraction in primitive art? Must we assume that the more abstract its form, the more "spiritual" its meaning? If so, does the difference between the Bakota and Sepik River figures reflect an equally great difference in the kinds of ancestor worship from which they spring, or are there perhaps other factors to be taken into account as well?

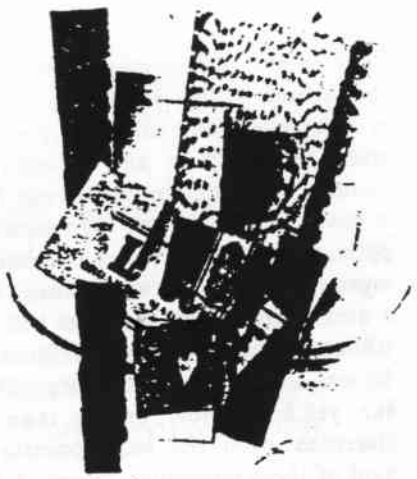
As it happens, the Bakota guardians provide a good test for these assumptions. They have been collected in considerable numbers, and the differences among them are notable, even though they all clearly belong to a single type and must have been employed for exactly the same purpose. Our second specimen (fig. 28) is almost identical with the first, except for the head, which in comparison seems almost gruesomely realistic; its shape is strongly convex rather than concave, and every detail has an unmistakable representational meaning. This face, with its open mouth full of pointed teeth, is obviously designed to frighten. Here, we feel, is a guardian figure that does indeed live up to its function. Yet the members of the tribe failed to share our reaction, for they found the more abstract guardian figure equally acceptable. What, then, is the relation between the two? They were probably made at different times, but the interval could not have been more than a century or two, inasmuch as wooden sculpture does not survive for long under tropical conditions, and European travelers, so far as we know, did not begin to bring back any Bakota guardians until the eighteenth century. In any event, given the rigidly conservative nature of primitive society, we can hardly believe that the ancestor cult of the Bakota underwent any significant change during the time span that separates figure 27 from figure 28. Which of them came first, or—to put the question more cautiously—which represents the older, more nearly original version? Figure 28, surely, since we cannot imagine how its realistic features could have evolved from the spare geometry of figure 27. The line of development thus leads from figure 28 to figure 27, from representation to abstraction (we also have a good many intermediate examples). This change seems to have taken place while the religious meaning remained the same. Must we then credit the primitive artist and his public with an interest in abstraction for its own sake? That hardly sounds plausible. There is, I think, a far easier explanation: the increasingly abstract quality of the Bakota guardians resulted from endless repetition. We don't know how many such figures were in use at the same time, but the number must have been considerable,

30. *Hornblower*, from Benin, Nigeria. Late 16th–early 18th century. Bronze, height 24⅞". The Museum of Primitive Art, New York

since each guardian presided over a container of not more than a dozen skulls. Their life expectancy being limited, they had to be replaced at frequent intervals, and the conservative temper of primitive society demanded that every new guardian follow the pattern of its predecessor. Yet, as we know, no copy is ever completely faithful to its model; so long as he repeated the basic outlines of the traditional design, the Bakota carver enjoyed a certain latitude, for no two of the many surviving guardian figures have exactly the same facial structure. Maybe these slight variations were even expected of him, so as to distinguish the newly created guardian from the one it replaced. Any gesture or shape that is endlessly repeated tends to lose its original character—it becomes ground down, simplified, more abstract. We see a good example of this in the ideographs of Chinese writing, which started out as tiny pictures but before long lost all trace of their representational origin and became mere signs. The same kind of transformation, although not nearly as far-reaching, can be traced among the Bakota guardians: they grew simpler and more abstract, since this was the only direction in which they could develop. One might term what happened to them "abstraction by inbreeding." We have discussed the process at such length because it is a fundamental characteristic of [illegible]



780. Pablo Picasso. *Still Life with Chair Caning.* 1911–12. 10¹/₂ × 13³/₄". Collection the Artist



781. Georges Braque. *Le Courrier.* 1913. Collage, 20 × 22¹/₂". The Philadelphia Museum of Art (A. E. Gallatin Collection)

shaded in a way that gives them a certain three-dimensionality. We cannot always be sure whether they are concave or convex; some look like chunks of solidified space, others like fragments of translucent bodies. They constitute a unique kind of matter, which imposes a new integrity and continuity on the entire canvas. The *Demoiselles,* unlike *The Joy of Life,* can no longer be read as an image of the external world; its world is its own, analogous to nature but constructed along different principles. Picasso's revolutionary "building material," compounded of voids and solids, is hard to describe with any precision. The early critics, who saw only the prevalence of sharp edges and angles, dubbed the new style Cubism.

That the *Demoiselles* owes anything to Cézanne may at first seem incredible. Nevertheless, Picasso had studied Cézanne's late work (such as fig. 757) with great care, finding in Cézanne's abstract treatment of volume and space the translucent structural units from which to derive the facets of Cubism. The link is clearer in Picasso's portrait of Ambroise Vollard (fig. 779), painted four years later: the facets are now small and precise, more like prisms, and the canvas has the balance and refinement of a fully mature style. Contrasts of color and texture, so pronounced in the *Demoiselles,* are now reduced to a minimum (the subdued tonality of the picture approaches monochrome), so as not to compete with the design. And the structure has become so complex and systematic that it would seem wholly cerebral if the "imprismed" sitter's face did not emerge with such dramatic force. Of the "barbaric" distortions in the *Demoiselles* there is now no trace; they had served their purpose. Cubism has become an abstract style within the purely Western sense. But its distance from observed reality has not significantly increased—Picasso may be playing an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with nature, but he still needs the visible world to challenge his creative powers. The non-objective realm held no appeal for him, then or later.

By 1910, Cubism was well established as an alterna to Fauvism, and Picasso had been joined by a numbe other artists, notably Georges Braque (1882-1963), w whom he collaborated so intimately that their work that time is difficult to tell apart. Both of them—it is clear to whom the chief credit belongs—initiated next phase of Cubism, which was even bolder than first. We see its beginnings in Picasso's *Still Life* of 1911 (fig. 780). Most of the painting shows the now-fami facets, except for the letters; these, being already abstr signs, could not be translated into prismatic shapes, from beneath the still life emerges a piece of imitat chair caning, which has been pasted onto the can and the picture is "framed" by a piece of rope. This trusion of alien materials has a most remarkable effe the abstract still life appears to rest on a real surface (chair caning) as on a tray, and the substantiality of t tray is further emphasized by the rope. Within a y Picasso and Braque were producing still lifes compo almost entirely of cut and pasted scraps of material, w only a few lines added to complete the design. In fine example by Braque (fig. 781) we recognize strip imitation wood graining, part of a tobacco wrapper w a contrasting stamp, half the masthead of a newspa and a bit of newsprint made into a playing card (the of hearts). The technique came to be known as *col* (the French word for "paste-up"). Why did Picasso Braque suddenly prefer the contents of the waste basket to brush and paint? Because, wanting to exp the new concept of the picture-as-a-tray, they found best way to put real things on the tray. The i dients of a collage actually play a double role; they been shaped and combined, then drawn or painted t to give them a representational meaning, but they not lose their original identity as scraps of mate "outsiders" in the world of art. Thus their functio both to *represent* (to be part of an image) and to *pre*

The second of our main currents is the one we called abstraction. When discussing Kandinsky, we said that the term is usually taken to mean the process (or the result) of analyzing and simplifying observed reality. Literally, it means "to draw away from, to separate." If we have ten apples, and then separate the ten from the apples, we get an "abstract number," a number that no longer refers to particular things. But "apples," too, is an abstraction, since it places ten apples in one class, without regard for their individual qualities. The artist who sets out to paint ten apples will find no two of them alike, yet he cannot possibly take account of all their differences: even the most painstakingly realistic portrayal of these particular pieces of fruit is bound to be some sort of an abstraction. Abstraction, then, goes into the making of any work of art, whether the artist knows it or not. The process was not conscious and controlled, however, until the Early Renaissance, when artists first analyzed the shapes of nature in terms of mathematical bodies (see page 327). Cézanne and Seurat revitalized this approach and explored it further; they are the direct ancestors of the abstract movement in twentieth-century art. Its real creator, however, was Pablo Picasso.

About 1905, stimulated as much by the *Fauves* as by the retrospective exhibitions of the great Post-Impressionists, Picasso gradually abandoned the melancholy lyricism of his Blue Period for a more robust style. He shared Matisse's enthusiasm for Gauguin and Cézanne, but he viewed these masters very differently; in 1906–07 he produced his own counterpart to *The Joy of Life*, a monumental canvas so challenging that it outraged even Matisse (fig. 778). The title, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* ("The Young Ladies of Avignon"), does not refer to the women of that name, but to Avignon Street in a notorious section of Barcelona: when Picasso started the picture, it was to be a temptation scene in a brothel, but he ended up with a composition of five nudes and a still life. But what nudes! Matisse's generalized figures in *The Joy of Life* (see fig. 770) seem utterly innocuous compared to this savage aggressiveness. The three on the left are angular distortions of classical figures, but the violently dislocated features and bodies of the other two have all the barbaric qualities of primitive art (compare figs. 26–28, 33–34). Following Gauguin's lead, the *Fauves* had discovered the aesthetic appeal of African and Oceanic sculpture, and had introduced Picasso to this material; but it was he, rather than they, who used primitive art as a battering ram against the classical conception of beauty. Not only the proportions, but the organic integrity and continuity of the human body are denied here, so that the canvas (in the apt description of one critic) "resembles a field of broken glass." Picasso, then, has destroyed a great deal; what has he gained in the process? Once we recover from the initial shock, we begin to see that the destruction is quite methodical: everything—the figures as well as their setting—is broken up into angular edges or facets: these, we will note, are not flat, but

778. Pablo Picasso. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. 1906–07. 96 × 92". The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest)

779. Pablo Picasso. *Ambroise Vollard*. 1909–10. 36 × 25 1/8". Pushkin Museum, Moscow