Metamorphoses of the Past: The iconographic stimuli of Picasso’s creative imagination and their critical interpretation by Christian Zervos'

Chara Kolokytha
Resumé
Přijímání zahraničních způsobů? – sdružení Junimea a jeho kritika kulturního přivlastňování při modernizaci Rumunska

Tento příspěvek se zabývá kulturní debatou, která opanovala proces modernizace v Rumunsku ve druhé polovině 19. století: Do jaké míry mohou být stávající umělecká díla přínosem či překážkou při budování nové moderní kultury? Iniciátoři debaty kriticky nahlížejí populární přizpůsobení se zahraničním kulturním produktům, v rumunském kontextu novým, a namítají, že tento proces, na rozdíl od původního záměru, kulturnímu pokroku ublíží. Tento argument, známý pod označením „formy bez obsahu“ („forme fără fond“) s velkým ohlasem předložil Titu Maiorescu v roce 1868 ve svém článku „Proti dnešnímu směřování rumunské kultury“ („În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română“). Příspěvek se věnuje tomuto argumentu, a ptá se po jeho souvislosti s výtvarným uměním.

Klíčová slova:
teorie modernizace, evolucionistický model vývoje, umění a politika

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The references to the rejection of the art of the past in the modernist context have to be understood in terms of a reaction against academic practice rather than an unconsidered obliteration of the past itself as an obstacle. The term academicism mainly referred to the pictorial systems taught at the Ecoles de Beaux-Arts and promoted by the Institute which were based on altered models that had survived from Greek classical antiquity through Roman times to the Italian Renaissance. With very few exceptions, the art of the past continued to be regarded as a source and origin for modern art. In twentieth century France, the general urge for a return to the sources gave birth to two distinct directions that approached with renewed interest the art of the Middle-Ages and the relics of primitive cultures giving birth respectively to the modernist French school and the international School of Paris. The first sought to reconnect with the Gothic tradition which allegedly survived and remained intact from the Roman yoke but eventually succumbed to Renaissance art which came to be regarded as an obstacle to its development. The second rejected all aspects of influence derived from the historical era turning to pre-classical sources and the spontaneous creations of the primitive human. Both directions rejected the conception of art as a summary of systems and pre-established canons. Consequently this renovated interest in the pre-classic and pre-renaissance past indicated a return to spontaneous and instinctive expression rather than a myopic appropriation of its pictorial norms, which was the foundation of academic practice. I seek to discuss here the case of Picasso through the way he approached and appropriated past iconographical sources into his work. Although the references to the past became self-evident in his works produced after the Second World War, the artist was moderate in accepting the influence of the past earlier in

has career, arguably because of his pioneer role in the anti-academic movement. Given the artist left us little
evidence as to his own positions, it is pertinent to focus on the way his work was presented by Christian Zervos, who published in collaboration with the artist his complete catalogue in 33 volumes starting in 1932. The invention of cubism, attributed to Picasso and Braque, not only rejected the conventional approach to pictorial synthesis, decomposing its essential parts, but also gave preponderance to the object at the expense of the subject-matter. Most cubist syntheses were inspired by trivial objects of everyday life attempting to establish a shift in focus from the depicted object to its formal decomposition. Following Cézanne, the formal aspects of cubism had no precedent in past artistic production, indicating a total break with western tradition. Its conception and development was in fact linked to primitive non-western African arts. Scholars and critics have identified Les Demoiselles d'Avignon as the starting point of cubism. 2 The work was completed between 1906 and 1907 with primitive African masks being identified as its primary source of inspiration. Zervos reproduced the work in his magazine together with African masks since 1927. He furthermore announced the second volume of the catalogue as dealing with the African epoch and the beginning of cubism. The work was acquired by the MoMA in New York in 1939. Its acquisition was followed by a significant retrospective and a catalogue in which Alfred Barr confirmed the African references on the faces of the figures. This was in fact the first institutional interpretation of the work which Picasso himself declared inaccurate the same year. He informed Zervos that by the time the work was completed he had not seen the collection of African masks at the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro. His words were published in the second volume of the catalogue in 1942. Picasso admitted instead that he drew inspiration from Bronze Age Iberian sculpture that he had seen at the Louvre in 1906. It is true that Picasso owned that time two pieces of Iberian sculpture which subsequently proved to have been stolen from the Louvre and were returned to the museum. 4 The Iberian references are evident in the two central figures. However the faces of the remaining three figures betrays his response to African art.

Christopher Green has suggested several possible influences coming from photographs and the illustrated press of the time, even if the precise model has not been specified. 5 Although the faces bear African features, my hypothesis is that the positions of the seated figure on the right and the standing figure on the far left are significantly reminiscent of the two female figures in Gauguin’s Tahitian Fishermens (1891, Staatsliche, Berlin). Considering however the historical context in which the statement to Zervos was made it is difficult to ignore that the political climate in Spain had affected decisively the identity of the artist, who argued the need to reconnect with his ancestral sources while he also seemed to appreciate the references to his Spanish identity which were diffuse in the context of the Spanish Civil War. 6 Zervos himself stretched his parallels with El Greco on the occasion of an illustrated volume that he published the same year. In every case, the influence of the primitive past functioned here as the starting point of cubism furthermore confirming its Mediterranean identity that Zervos preferred to evoke in his texts.

Zervos accepted deliberately Picasso’s influence from primitive imagery but totally refrained from connecting his art to the classic tradition even when he commented on his classical period – the years between 1917 and 1925. The period is generally associated with the Call to Order concept which indicated a general urge for a return to normacy that was deemed a necessity in the aftermath of the Great War through a revived interest in the Greek classical and French neo-classical traditions. 7 Ingres, the symbol of academicism, has been identified as Picasso’s primary source during that period, an appreciation that Zervos consistently denied. The illustration of the Picasso catalogue played a significant role in supporting Zervos’ the manner of judgements. The Portrait of Madame Rosenberg and her Daughter (Picasso Museum, Paris/Zervos cat. 2, no. 242), painted in 1918 in Biarritz to celebrate the artist’s new contract with the art dealer Paul Rosenberg, was obviously reminiscent of past times official portraiture treated here in a mundane manner. A closer focus on the iconography renders evident that the pose of the central sitter and the detail of the arm reposing on the decorated throne-like armchair point to the influence by Velázquez ( Pope Innocent X, 1650, Doria Pamphilji) and El Greco (Cardi...
figures from the Turkish Bath to paint his Three Bathers in 1918. But what he actually achieved was the transposition of elements and their formal transformation according to his own vision. This was in principle the way Zervos explained Picasso’s iconographical “borrowings.”

Picasso responded to a wide range of visual stimuli throughout his career. His interest in primitive sources is self-evident. Matthias Grunewald’s Isenheim triptych attracted his attention in the early 1930s, when a scholarly debate unfolded concerning the identity of the artist and the nature of his artistic formation. Picasso dealt with the theme of the Crucifixion (Musée Picasso, Paris) in 1930, when he had not seen Grunewald’s work on display at the museum of Colmar. Scholars have connected the work with the Isenheim altarpiece. However the iconography is significantly different. Picasso appears to have drawn inspiration from diverse sources. Barr identified the composition as a potpourri of traditional and primitive iconography, comparing the face of the figure of Christ with that of primitive Cycladic idols. The two thieves descended from the cross are depicted on the ground contradicting the Gospel narrative. The same applies to the simultaneous nailing of Christ by the person on the ladder and the Longinus figure on the horse representing actions performed at different phases. Kauffmann argued that Picasso had attempted to present a conventional religious scene with the characteristics of Mithraic primitive rituals. The work belongs to Picasso’s surrealist period. Zervos insisted that the formal distortions of the central figures have to be compared to Picasso’s earlier formal experiments notably evident in the Seated Bather of 1930 (MoMA/ Zervos cat. 7, n. 306). Following his visit to Colmar in 1932, Picasso produced a few ink drawings which are closer to Grunewald’s iconography. The formal approach here is biomorphic following the style he introduced in his Dinard drawings in 1927. It is evident in both approaches of the theme of the Crucifixion that Picasso sought for a model which was eventually transformed and gave way to two distinct formal approaches, vindicating Zervos’ interpretations of the prolific character of his work.

Zervos argued that there is no virgin birth in art but originality of expression. To better illustrate his views it is pertinent to compare Picasso’s original...
transformations with Manet’s à la lettre appropriation of past iconographical sources. In 1932 Zervos addressed a trenchant critique to Manet maintaining that the artist lacked imagination being attached to technical aspects that attributed a sterile character to his syntheses. Unlike Picasso, Manet did not reinvent his subjects. His eyes and spirit undermined his instincts. Attached to the correctness of the technique, he argued, Manet will never be mistaken but he will never invent anything either.17 Zervos accused Manet of plagiarism reproducing a series of works which demonstrated that the artist replicated several Spanish mainly but also Italian masters of the past. His Luncheon on the Grass (Musée d’Orsay) was copied directly from a detail of Raphael’s Judgement of Paris (engraving by Marcantonio, Metropolitan Museum of Art) but his figures, he observed, reflect his venal bourgeois spirit and moral poverty. The Boy with a Dog (1860–1, private collection) was copied directly from Murillo (ca. 1650, Hermitage) with Manet altering solely the position of the figure and the pedigree of the dog. The same was true with his Olympia (Musée d’Orsay) painted after Titian’s Venus of Urbino (Uffizi) but being unable to achieve the plastic expression of Goya’s Nude Maja (Prado) which offered an original transformation of Titian’s composition that served in both cases as a model.18

Zervos returned to Picasso’s ‘borrowings’ from the masters of the past many years later, in 1960. In a lengthy essay published in Cahiers d’Art he exposed Picasso’s sources for the first time in approximately 30 years. His approach to the artist however was significantly different from his earlier polemic regarding Manet. Zervos admitted that Picasso was one of the very few artists for whom the confrontation with the masterpieces of the past served as a tool to enrich his works with their aesthetic equivalents, maintaining his authenticity without sacrificing his personality and proving that the artist who studies a particular work and the one who produced it represent two different realities.19 Instead of being an obstacle, the past always served for Picasso as a point of departure for new stylistic inventions. Zervos cited many artists after whom Picasso worked including Cranach, Delacroix, Courbet, El Greco, Velazquez and others. As a matter of fact the article served as an introduction to Picasso’s variations of Velazquez’s Las Meninas. Although significantly distant from the cubist idiom, these works Zervos argued were based on the same conception which was the exteriorisation and objective-ification of the subject. The problem for Zervos had never been the model, with the exception of Ingres, but the quality of its transformation. And Picasso was exemplary in achieving it.

19 Christian Zervos, ‘Confrontations de Picasso avec des œuvres d’art d’autrefois,’ Cahiers d’Art, 1960, p. 10 (pp. 9–52).
Příspěvek se zabývá zdroji Picassovy ikonografie, které je možno vysledovat jak v primitivním zobrazení, tak v západní malířské tradici, a zejména se zaměřuje na to, jak byly jeho vlivy z minulosti prezentovány Christianem Zervosem v kompletním katalogu jeho prací, publikovaném v 33 svazcích, počínaje rokem 1932 a v jeho modernistickém magazinu Cahiers d'Art. Odkazy na minulost byly v umělcově práci vždy přítomny. Zervosova kritika má dvě fáze. Nejprve až na několik málo výjimek odmítl vliv minulosti a argumentoval v termínech transpozice elementů a jejich plastické transformace. Asi třicet let bojoval Zervos za obranu Picassových raných děl, aby boj v roce 1960 ukončil, a s překvapující upřímností připustil Picassovu poválečnou potřebu kopírovat staré mistry, přičemž jmenoval jeden po druhém jeho zdroje.

Klíčová slova: Picasso, Zervos, ikonografie

Resumé

Metamorfózy minulosti: Ikonografické podněty Picassovy kreativní imaginace a jejich kritická interpretace od Christiana Zervose

A gaze placed in itself, colour of the soul – the descriptions of this kind were used not long ago in an attempt to grasp the specificity of aesthetic sensitivity connecting the characters as different as Marcel Proust and Johannes Vermeer, highly valued by him. But what may such terms mean for a contemporary philosopher? And what could the aesthetic experience of color in Proust and Vermeer, the philosophy of anamnesis by Plato, the explorations focused on the idea of anamnesis by Jean-François Lyotard and the discoveries of modern cognitive developmental neuroscience possibly have in common?

I will try to provide as much comprehensive as it is possible here, yet brief answers to the above questions.

In the first part of this essay, I will focus on the idea of ancient anamnesis and its return in a new, spectacular installment in the twentieth-century Lyotardian philosophy of art and perception. In the second part, showing how a very antique philosophical idea might inspire the course of investigation in a very new scientific branch, I will try to explain, mainly by demonstration, some possible ways of cooperation opening between philosophical aesthetics and contemporary neuroscience.

1 Rene Huyghe, James O'Higgins, Vermeer and Proust, Salmagundi 44/45, spring-summer 1979, pp. 78-88.
4 E.g.: Michel Pastoureau, Blu. Storia di un colore, Milano 2015, pp. 5–12.