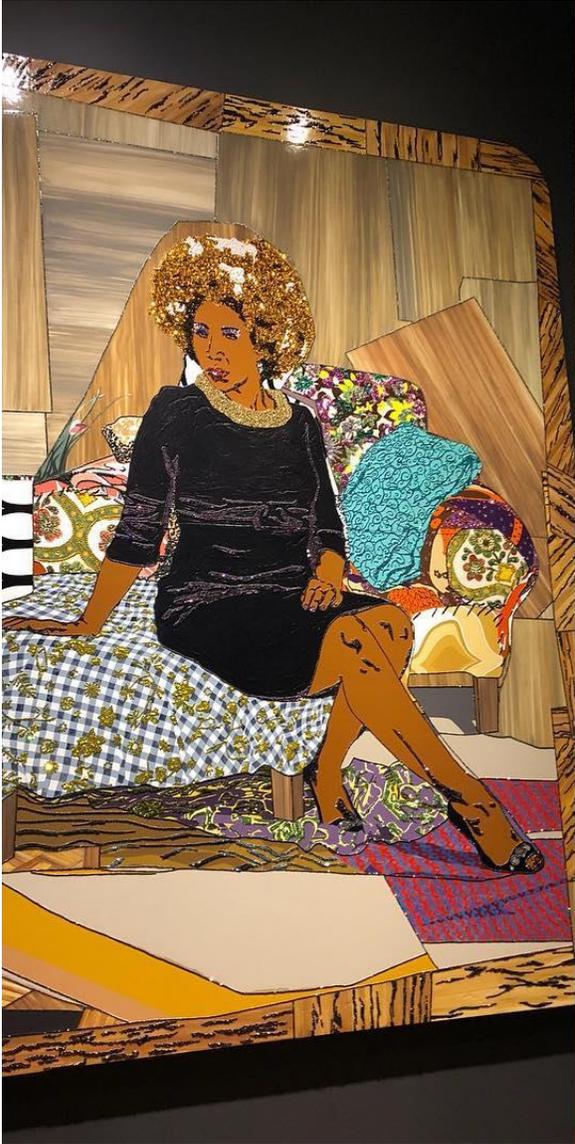


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IDENTITY

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When I visited the Picasso Face-to-Face Past and Present exhibit at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), I was completely floored and enamored by the exquisite collection. Artists from Africa or of African descent were brought into the narrative from an initial colonized and Eurocentrist approach to African art to a now profound transformation, making up these beautiful works. I selected these particular artworks as I personally identified the most with the message behind them. I have attempted to decode the hidden elements behind each perspective and analyze each artwork with an informative yet emotional and spontaneous approach.



Zino Saro-Wiwa, *The Invisible Man: The Weight of Absence*, Gidee print 5/5, 2015

Following the execution of her father and having spent 20 years in exile, the artist returned to her homeland of the Niger Delta region and found her catharsis and calling in a newer form of masquerade style called Ogele. It is said that one of the masks invoked memories of her father due to the profound likeness it bore to him and prompted Zino Saro-Wiwa to create her own Neo-Ogoni mask. This was to confront the spirit of the familial troubles she had encountered with the men in her life who had disappeared either through death or some other mystery (absence); hence the fitting name for the artwork (*The Weight of Absence*). That is what the Janus-faced mask represented, featuring men that had somehow vanished throughout her life or were hard to attain (father, brothers, lovers, as well as illusive Ogele dancers). The black and white face represents the sadness caused by the loss while the pink lined face (not pictured here) speaks about anger associated with abandonment. Since thousands of years, the masquerade culture was mainly dominated by men, even when calling upon female spirits. She sought to challenge this view and pioneered to bring to light that women in society carried several burdens (physical as well as emotional) and were more than capable of wearing the mask and representing their own culture. It is interesting to observe that the wearer of the mask is a woman and dressed notably in feminine attire. She encouraged the women folk to take up masquerade and form their own troupe and this idea was heartily welcomed by them. The artist is known to seek out the connection between self and the environment as well as performance and emotion and has long felt the cognitive and emotional discourse in masquerade; either in performance or African masks displayed in museums. She was an ardent believer in the philosophy that a world existed between the face and the mask. She sought to bridge the same gap through her work by making the wearer experience that world through performance. I personally identified the most with this artwork and its backstory during my research for this assignment.

Zina Saro-Wiwa

Born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in 1976

The Invisible Man

Giclee print, 5/5

Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

The Invisible Man: The Weight of Absence

2015

Giclee print, edition of 5 and 2 artist's proofs

Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

The Invisible Man mask pictured in these photos is inspired by a style of masquerade called Ogele found in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The mask depicts the men that have disappeared in Saro-Wiwa's life, through death or otherwise. It also represents the emotional burdens carried by women, in this case the one caused by the weight of absence. The black and white side of the Janus-faced mask represents the sadness associated with loss and the lined, pink face, the anger associated with abandonment.

The Invisible Man was conceived to bridge the emotional gap Saro-Wiwa felt existed between onlookers and masquerade. Masquerade masks often feature animals symbolizing age-old folkloric stories, but emotion was the element Saro-Wiwa wanted to employ to test the cathartic and poetic possibilities of mask wearing. The work also speaks to gender dynamics surrounding masquerade culture. Though masquerades are mostly performed by men, *The Invisible Man* mask can only be worn by women.

Saro-Wiwa works in video, photography and installation. She explores the relationship between self and environment, as well as the relationship between emotion and performance. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Art in 2017 and is the founder of and curator for the Port Harcourt contemporary art gallery Boys' Quarters Project Space, which radically reimagines the idea of environmentalism through art.

Description of the artwork by MMFA



Mickalene Thomas, *I Learned The Hard Way*, Rhinestones, acrylic, enamel on panel, 2010

As I walked into the exhibit, it was hard to surpass or even look away from this artwork as it took up almost an entire wall in all its magnificence and glory. I was intrigued by the bold and striking subject apart from the highly constructive landscape and interior of the piece. The artist is most widely known for her large scale works of African American women contextualized in the 1970s style environments of colorful patterns, wood paneling, and rhinestones. The first thing that can be noticed from the top of the frame is the scratched wood paneling which is sectioned off in blocks, creating an unbalanced visual. This could be an indication of lower-class strata. However, the rhinestones etched on the same wood attempt to contradict the same notion and communicate false representation. This artwork was in execution during the time Sharon Jones and The Dap-Kings had released their music album with the same title, which spoke of a love that was harsh but imparted a life lesson at the same time. Mickalene Thomas grew up in New Jersey in the 1970s and 1980s, and influences from her life have inspired the backdrop of the decorative patterns of this collage. There is a lot of attention to detail. The artist successfully procures a trifecta of references to pop culture, Western art and African lineage in her work. Her muse is shown sitting gracefully with her legs stretched out and her head laid back. She exudes sensuality, grace and class. She is dressed modernly and fashionably. Attention is drawn to her glittering jewelry and Afro, with the hair being a woman's crowning glory. The artist studied photography during her time at Yale which is a key factor in her work as she believes it is the most powerful form or representation of identity, figure, and persona. She is portrayed embodying perfectly the notions of beauty, power, and importance. The muse is not objectified but empowered; transforming the passivity of the pose to the power of performance. She asserts these aforementioned notions and ideals of black women by inserting them into poses and compositions derived from Western art history, a position they were historically excluded from. In doing so, she celebrates the black woman today. Mickalene Thomas uses seductive materials like rhinestones, acrylics, and enamel on wood paneling which confronts the viewer head-on and makes her artworks relatable to a wide audience particularly the modern black woman apart from successfully communicating identity.

Mickalene Thomas
Née à Camden (New Jersey) en 1971

J'ai appris à la dure

2010

Faux diamants, acrylique, émail sur panneau

Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal
Achat, fonds de la Campagne du Musée 1988-1993 (2013)

I Learned the Hard Way [J'ai appris à la dure] est le titre de l'album de Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings, sorti au moment où Thomas réalise cette peinture. Sur des rythmes soul, Sharon Jones chante l'amour cruel mais qui enseigne. En écho à la chanson, la femme noire d'un certain âge, assise le dos droit, les jambes en évidence, se montre digne et confiante. La pose suggère une force de caractère et une sensualité discrète : j'ai appris à la dure, mais j'ai appris. L'œuvre fait partie d'une série de portraits où Thomas représente ses modèles dans des environnements abstraits, déconstruits, qui rendent compte du travail du collage. Les motifs sont fleuris, colorés ou rappellent les nervures du bois. Des sections sont ornées de pierres dorées : la superbe coiffure « afro » brille ici de tous ses feux.

Thomas vit et travaille à Brooklyn. Elle est reconnue pour ses portraits de femmes noires, féminines, fortes, représentées soit habillées de vêtements colorés et parées d'extravagants bijoux, soit complètement nues. Thomas s'approprie les représentations populaires de la féminité noire – de l'héroïne de la blaxploitation au cinéma à l'imagerie de la classe moyenne afro-américaine – pour interroger les limites de ces stéréotypes.

Mickalene Thomas
Born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1971

I Learned the Hard Way

2010

Rhinestones, acrylic, enamel on panel

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Purchase, the Museum Campaign 1988-1993 Fund (2013)

I Learned the Hard Way is the title of the album by Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings that came out at the time when Thomas was executing this painting. In soul style, Sharon Jones sang about a love that is cruel, but imparts a lesson. Echoing the song, the middle-aged Black woman sitting straight-backed, her legs on display, appears dignified and confident. Her pose suggests strength of character and a discreet sensuality. I learned the hard way, but I learned. This work is one of a series of portraits in which Thomas depicts her models in abstract, deconstructed settings that indicate work in collage. The patterns comprise vivid shades and florals, or evoke the grain of wood. Some sections are decorated with golden stones, and the woman's stunning Afro glitters brightly.

Thomas lives and works in Brooklyn. She is known for her portraits of strong, feminine Black women, depicted either dressed in colourful clothes and bedecked with extravagant jewellery, or completely nude. She appropriates popular images of black femininity—from the heroines of Blaxploitation films to the imagery of the Afro-American middle class—to question the limits of such stereotypes.

Description of the artwork by MMFA



Romuald Hazoumè, The Goddess of Love, wood, wire, padlocks, 2012

This particular artwork sculpture stood out brightly in the middle of the room. At first what appears to be a sculpture of some goddess or deity due to the obvious torso and female head (both made of wood) soon highlights the viewer's attention to the skirt made up of chain mail wire (2000 closed locks). Interestingly, the goddess wears their keys as necklaces and earrings. Further historical research supported by the museum's information reveals the artist hails from Benin, where voodoo is the state religion. In accordance to its primitive traditions, the goddess wears this skirt as a protective suit of armor. She is protected by the warriors and has the credibility and ability to store and pass on love. Personally, I am of the opinion that the goddess of love bears similarities to mythological figures like Cupid as well as The Greek Goddess of Love, Aphrodite. The goddess has the power and energy to store love and demands the respect of the warriors in return. She demonstrates and allows us to try the possibilities of voodoo and underpins the collusion of different cultural traditions. The sculpture's design, construction, and ideology reference the Western practice of attaching locks to bridges (namely Pont Des Arts in Paris). I would confess to having participated in the same ritual with a former lover to be part of something trendy which couples did. This sums up my relation to this artifact and why this made the cut for my third and final artwork to analyze. As the artist himself points out, it is a very serious act in voodoo of throwing away the key after closing the lock. Since the 1990s, he developed a multidisciplinary practice which was marked by Fa, a sacred divination and initiation system. It represents the soul of the culture of the indigenous people of West Africa and is the means of communication with the gods and ancestors, where communication happens through a unique and complex system of 256 symbols, each symbolizing 16 parables and 16 expressions. The artist works with discarded and used objects, shaping them to represent his take on global issues and plays with stereotypes associated with Africa in his works (voodoo in this particular instance) and gives back to the West the same consumer refuse that engulfs society today.

Given below is the description of the artwork by MMFA.

Romuald Hazoumè

Né à Porto-Novo (Bénin) en 1962

La Déesse de l'amour

2012

Bois, fil de fer, cadenas

Avec l'aimable concours de la Galerie Magnin-A, Paris

La Déesse de l'amour s'inscrit dans une réinterprétation de la culture ancestrale yoruba dont Hazoumè se réclame. Vêtue d'une jupe faite de 2 000 cadenas fermés, elle porte les clés en guise de boucles d'oreilles et de colliers. « Dans le vaudou, c'est un acte très grave de fermer un cadenas et de jeter la clé », explique l'artiste. On peut aussi y voir une référence aux cadenas que les amoureux fixent sur plusieurs ponts européens dont le pont des Arts à Paris, la déesse ayant ici le pouvoir d'accumuler de l'amour et de le transmettre.

Travaillant au Bénin, Hazoumè développe une pratique multidisciplinaire. Depuis le début des années 1990, son œuvre est empreinte du *fa*, parole sacrée initiatique et divinatoire au cœur de la religion vaudou. Ses réalisations sculptées se caractérisent par leur grande économie. Il travaille à partir d'objets usagés dont il conserve la patine naturelle. Il assemble des matériaux, rebuts et objets désuets qu'il utilise tels quels, qu'il forme ou déforme, pour représenter sa vision de la société, de faits événementiels ou d'enjeux mondiaux. Jouant des stéréotypes liés à l'Afrique, il « renvoie à l'Ouest ce qui lui appartient, c'est-à-dire les déchets de la société de consommation qui nous envahit chaque jour ».

Romuald Hazoumè

Born in Porto-Novo, Benin, in 1962

The Goddess of Love

2012

Wood, wire, padlocks

Courtesy of Galerie Magnin-A, Paris

The Goddess of Love falls within a reinterpretation of the ancestral Yoruba culture which Hazoumè claims. Dressed in a skirt made up of 2,000 closed locks, she wears their keys as earrings and necklaces. "It is a very serious act in voodoo to close a lock and throw away the key," explains the artist. We may also see in this work a reference to the locks that lovers attach to a number of European bridges, among them the Pont des Arts in Paris, the goddess here having the power to gather and pass on love.

Working in Benin, Hazoumè has developed a multidisciplinary practice. Since the early 1990s his work has been marked by *Fa*, a sacred initiation and divination system that lies at the heart of the voodoo religion. His carved pieces are characterized by their great economy. He works with used objects, preserving their natural patina, and assembles such materials—discarded, outdated articles he employs just as they are—shaping or distorting them to depict his vision of society, particular events or global issues. Playing with stereotypes associated with Africa, he "sends back to the West what belongs to them, that is to say, the refuse of the consumer society that engulfs us every day."

Bibliography:

1. The pictures of the following artworks were taken by the student on an iPhone 8 during her visit to The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The sources below were consulted for further research and insight into the artworks.
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