

IZIBONGO

Celebrating Art in Africa and the Diaspora

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Quai

de

Bangwa

A Conversation between Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Helena Rubinstein

A One Act Play

Celebrating the African influence on Modern Art
Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

Of around thirty minutes duration, this one-act play was inspired by the photograph below. It wasn't hard to imagine the conversation that follows, when you look at the setting; easy chairs of leather, surrounded by books and African sculpture.

I'm not sure when Helena Rubinstein first inhabited the Quai de Bethune apartment, whether it was 1935, 1936, or 1937, as I know there was demolition and re-building going on in that complex. The thing that is certain, is that in 1935, she was the owner of "*Bangwa Queen*", after a deal with fellow collector, Charles Ratton.

I am happy to present to you, QUAI de BANGWA.

Editor – Natty Mark Samuels – africanschool.weebly.com – An African School Production

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***Bangwa Woman* is in the central, lower half of the cabinet, standing on her own.**

<https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2018/01/izibongo-magazine-2018.html>

<http://rastaites.com/izibongo-issues-49-56/>

Quai de Bangwa

A One Act Play

Narrator: There is a photograph that you can see on the internet, of a room in a Parisian apartment. The left wall, that part that can be seen, is full of books, except for an indentation in the wall, where the back of a leather sofa is set; there are also three easy chairs of the same material, that like the sofa, face a small table. The right wall cannot be seen, but due to light on the African sculpture in front of it and on the floor, a window must be located there, either side of which are bookshelves. But its the central wall that carries the most attraction. There is a cabinet that takes up the left side of this back wall. The upper shelving has books on them, the lower ones have African sculpture. I imagine the aforementioned chairs occupied by three people, who are focused on the sculpture standing on its own, in the lower half of the book case: the newest addition. The people sitting in the chairs are Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and the owner of the apartment on Quai de Bethune, Helena Rubinstein. It is 1935.

Pablo: They are going to love this at MoMa, Helena!

There are nods and little exclamations of agreement from the other two.

Helena: I agree Pablo, which is why I agreed to the loan. Better that it gets seen by thousands there, than a few dozen here.

Henry: How did you get Charles Ratton to part with it?

Helena: I kept on at him, Henri! In the end, he relented! Then there was a swop: his 'Bangwa', for a few pieces from my collection.

Matisse: You are truly blessed Helena

Helena: I feel that way sometimes Henri, when I get a gem like this.

Picasso gets up, moving away from the piece, towards the right, to see it from another perspective.

Pablo: Thinking back now, Charles was one of the first collectors to take African sculpture out from the "curio" labelling, retitling it as art, rather than as an item from ethnography.

Henri: True, but remember that at the turn of the century, the curio shops alongside the flea markets, were amongst the few places to buy African art.

Pablo: (returning to the table) Yes! And you could buy them cheap, because the average shop keeper didn't know what he had in his possession. Seen as primitive oddities, rather than gems of creativity. I was just thinking that if these works have to be in the West (**hand outstretched towards the figures on the shelf**), I'd rather they were in the hands of those such as Charles and Helena; people who have a genuine respect for the work, rather than someone who simply sees them as "exotica". I propose a toast to *Helena*. *Please raise your glass with me Henri. Raising his glass* To Helena, for bringing this gem to her living space, but more importantly, for lending it to MoMa, so the people of America can enjoy it too. **In happy agreement the two artists raise their glasses towards Helena and drink. In reply to the gesture, the smiling hostess curtsies to the men.**

Helena: Ahhh, so lovely to have you two here. This is what I call a blessing! Because of your long interest in African Art, I wanted you to be the first ones to see it here.

Pablo: Its an honour.

Henri: As you know, I've been in the Riveria, so haven't seen it. They say Cameroon is mountainous, embellished by waterfalls. I imagine her dancing near one, or by a river, at a ceremony of thanksgiving: gratitude for what the earth has given. Some say she was a queen; some say a chiefs sister; others, that she was a mother of twins, or a priestess of the earth. But whatever position she had, she was entrusted with the role of the one who represents the kingdom, when it is time to pay homage, or to say thank you. I see her...

The scene goes dark, while another scene is enlightened, showing a woman dancing, accompanied by drumming. The choice of backdrop I leave to the director, as with the last scenerio; it could be a painting or photo of a Cameroonian Grasslands scene, photo of the Bangwa Woman, or a cascade of green (in all its shades) hangings. It is a strident, self-assured dance. As she finishes, the scene darkens and we return to the apartment.

Pablo: I would have loved to have been there.

Helena: Me too!

Henri: Thinking about it, as a respected member of our community, as well as the cosmetic world, if you were Bangwa Helena, you would have been given that role.

Helena (laughing): I do like the look of her ivory necklace! And we seem to share a pulled-back hairstyle. I love her; she looks confident and vigorous: ready to do her duty.

Henri: That's it, she has a spirit of strong self-affirmation, of personal strength.

Pablo: If she was the king's sister, she would have been highly respected, alongside the Fon, the king. They say that when approaching his presence, you had to clap three times and walk towards him in a stooped position. When leaving, you had to walk backwards also in a lowered position. Something like this I guess... **He pauses briefly, then moves the little table and pouffe to the side, after which he takes a few steps back. Clapping three times and in a lowered position, he approaches Matisse and says...**

Oh, great Fon Matiswa
Bless all the artists of Paris.
Let them know some success as well as the struggle.
Give them bravery to go forward,
Stamina to persevere.
Let the rejection list be small.
Watch over us Fon Matiswa.

Henri: I have heard your plea, Master Artist.
Let the creative ones know that I shall support them.
If they beautify the communities
And teach the young ones what they know,
Yes, I shall watch over them.

Pablo: May your days overflow with blessings, Fon Matiswa. ***Walking backwards, Pablo clasps his hands in front of him, in thanks to the Fon, while lowering his head.***

Helena: (clapping enthusiastically) That was brilliant. I shall treasure those moments. That should have been caught on film! Wow! A rehearsed actor couldn't have done it better. ***She gives Picasso a peck on the cheek, who is near her and blows one to Matisse. Matisse is beaming; he salutes Picasso and the gesture is returned.***

Henri: Sitting with you two here, sends me back to 1906, to the site of another salon, founded by another great supporter of the arts: yes, to the home of Gertrude Stein. Pablo knows! If his biblical namesake had his moment on the road to Damascus, then his happened in the Rue de Fleurus. If on this special night, we rename this address, from Quai de Bethune to Quai de Bangwa, then that street, that night, nearly thirty years ago, should have been changed from Rue de Fleurus, to Rue de Vili.

Pablo: You took me to the Congo that night Henri, as tonight, Helena takes us to Cameroon. Yes, it was a very, very special evening. I couldn't stop holding that Congolese statue all night: my first interaction with African art. If St. Paul saw a great light; a great light went on in my head. I went home that night and drew till exhaustion said that's enough! Creatively, it was a life-changing evening. For awhile after that, I practically lived in the Trocadero!

Henri: Amadeo too!

Pablo: Yes, Modigliani. All those sketches he made of the Baule art, from the Ivory Coast. Then he gave us that great limestone "Head of a Woman". That elongated face, the shaped almond eyes and little mouth, which we know are lietmotifs of Baule artistry. The dusty and great Trocadero.

Henri: ***The scene fades out as light shows another. There is the backdrop of a photo of the exterior and attendant street noises.*** I see him now, hungover with absinthe and hash, trudging along, then slowly up the steps of the Trocadero. ***Then the noises disappear as we see a photo of the interior. He finds his way to the section where the African Art is – and sits there....*** As he sits and looks around, his agitation seems to go. He smiles as he perks up, as if he'd found a kind of haven.... He sits there for a few minutes, getting up now and again, to get a clearer look at a certain exhibit.... Then, he removes pad and pencils from the bag and begins to draw.

Strange isn't it, that in the same period, a country will produce a Mussolini and a soul such as Amadeo.

Pablo: The way he's bugging and harrasing their officials at the Eritrean/Ethiopian border, I sense trouble coming. He's itching to revenge the defeat of his army, by an Ethiopian one.

Henri: Yes he is. And remember, it was Brancusi who encouraged Modigliani to sculpt. After thanking the Baule of Ivory Coast, we have to thank our Romanian friend, for *Women's Head*.

Helena: Wish I'd been there that evening in 1906! When you think about it, that was an embryonic night for Modern Art: monumental

Pablo: We all came under the influencing aura of African art. Braque, Brancusi; you, with *Still Life With Negro Statuette*.

Henri: You, with *Les Desmoiselles d'e Avignon*

Pablo: Yes. On the way to Cubism, I passed through the Congo.

Helena: Senegal and Gabon.

Henri: Guinea and Mali.

Pablo: A wonderful journey.

Helena: Drinks gentlemen! Do you need topping up? Coffee, tea? Henri? I would have gone all the way to Pontarlier for you today Pablo, to get you the best absinthe.

Pablo: Ahhh, bless you Helena.

Henri: No thankyou Helena, I'm fine.

Pablo: What the Negro American artists in Harlem were reclaiming, was having a major influence on us also. None of us here can count the amount of hours we've spent looking at sculpture, masks and cloth from Africa. We began to look at other people, not just Europeans and Americans: we began to value the contribution of others. At school, we'd been told that Africans weren't able to create great art: that they were deficient. And then I see the Vili statuette. I learn that the Vili formed the Loango Kingdom, founded in the 15th century; that traded internally, as well as with the European: they produced master carvers in ivory, as well as with wood. I sometimes think Henri, how Modern Art would be, if we hadn't encountered Africa! Imagine, if you hadn't shown me the Vili Man? Blessings on all the curio shops and flea markets! They should put a plaque outside the Trocadero, in tribute to its gargantuan contribution to Modern Art.

Helena: Sad to think it will soon be closing.

Henri: Be good to have the plaque there before its closure, rather than a posthumous tribute.

Pablo: In time to come, I'm sure they'll recognise its great significance. Anyway, right now, its time for the toilet! ***He exits, going through the part of the room not seen in the photograph.***

Henri: Do you think we'll ever get there, to sub-Saharan Africa? To see the work being created, spend time in the presence of the masters.

Helen: Then in the evenings to reflect on it all, while drinking palm wine, beside a tributary of the Congo. I would love to research a traditional cosmetic out there, a cream called Tukula, made from camwood powder and palm oil; its a moisturiser of wide renown, treasured throughout the Congo region.

Henri: For me it would be the hangings. Actually, I should say dance skirts. Now, if some of them are nine, nearly ten feet in length, then...***He gets up, takes a few paces in the direction of where Picasso went and stops.*** About here. That's a lot of cloth to embroider! Brilliant embroidery of geometric patterning: I'd like one on my wall!

Picasso returns

Pablo: What are you doing Henri?

Henri: Gauging the length of the Kuba dance skirts.

Pablo: Yes, the Kuba. I'd like one of those skirts as a wall hanging.

Helena: Henri just said the same thing! ***They all laugh.***

Pablo: They were our teachers when it came to the geometric. Who else? Abstract was in their artistry, long before we'd applied the word to creativity! While sitting on the throne just then, a thought came to me. Was just wondering if just like the way African art has inspired us, whether in time to come, Negro artists will be influenced by Cubism or Surrealism.

Henri: Good question Pablo! For those that come to study in European art schools and studios, even if they're not influenced by it, will be disseminators of it, when they return to their homelands.

Helena: We bounce off each other, so its natural that in that bouncing, things rub off! As there is more interaction with Negro artists, we'll influence each other.

Pablo: So let it be. I hope they find something in my work, as I have enjoyed the masks of the Dan and the sculpture of the Fang.

Helena: I'm sure they will Pablo, I'm sure they will. I know that one day my collection will consist of known African Artists, as well as the names Chagall, Braque, Matisse and Picasso...

Suddenly, as Helena rises from the chair, she drops to the floor. Both Picasso and Matisse, aware of her diabetes and the way it manifests itself, simply hold a hand, sitting on the floor either side of her. Picasso begins humming the Duke Ellington song, Sophisticated Lady; Matisse soon joins in, in a more improvised fashion. After a couple of minutes, they help her back onto the easy chair. Matisse exits. He soon returns with a carafe of water. Pouring a glass, he offers it to Helena.

Helena: (*Taking a sip of water*). Thank you gentlemen. Not the first time you've seen this battle with blood and sugar – it certainly won't be the last. I still get embarrassed!

Pablo: Don't worry, you should have seen me falling over in some bar last week!

Henri: Yes, I did hear about that in the Riveria! ***She laughs with them.*** That's better!

Picasso stands and walks about, as if to emphasise his next words.

Picasso: Even though I haven't known planes and ships, I've travelled so far. Travelled so far in that golden hovel called Bateau-Lavoir. My battered wooden time machine, took me to a time before transatlantic slavery and colonialism: to a time of ancient art and monumental kingdoms. They said I went through an *Epoch Negre*; but it is much more than just a specific time period, as it remains with me. African art gave me bravery; to push on, pursuing the vision. It came when I needed it and it has remained.

Henri: I couldn't have said it better Pablo.

Helena: I do not see a time when I am not collecting African Art. I give thanks for Jacob Epstein, who made the introduction.

Pablo: I know the others are coming soon! Good, because I'm hungry now!

Henri: Me too! ***They all laugh.***

Pablo: But before the salon is open, I wanted to say thank you for this closed and intimate affair. To spend time with two great pioneers, both friends of mine. Thank you both, for the blessings of the day.

Helena: Yes, like a top restaurant that serves a special of the day: I got two today.

Henri: And so did I.

Beaming: they raise their glasses to each other.

Pablo: That image that Henri gave us, of the Bangwa woman, dancing in homage or gratitude, remains with me. Proud of who she is and what she represents. I see her...

The apartment disappears in darkness, as light comes on the dancer in an adjacent scene. Once again she dances: at a slower pace, but still oozing dignity and strength. The drum comes softer this time, as we hear her repeat the chant.

I dance for Si
And for the ancestor.

I dance so all can eat yam,
As well as cassava.

I dance for the Bangwa,
In a shrine called Africa.

The End