The Impact Of Colonization On African Art

Colonization is a process of infiltration and the predominance of large-scale populations over previously occupied lands or cultures. This rogue method of settling, as atrocious as it may be, dates back as many centuries and serves as the foundation of America as we know it today.

Moreover, the expansion of western powers and settlements across the globe has expanded European cultural ideals through art, sculpture, and architecture to the colonies in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. In this process, there is a cultural smudging that takes place at significant milestones, from the transformation of the media — the clothes, the language, and traditional art. During which the hidden history of those great people is erased, and the indigenous images are interpolated or distorted to foster a beneficial narrative based on European ideals.

In 1880, when Europeans saw a chance for economic, political, and social expansion, Africa's struggle and division began. 1 The, French, and Portuguese were three of the major European countries that saw Africa as undeveloped land, fully accessible for the taking. Europeans viewed Africans as uncivilized and inferior, allowing them to justify their actions and to continue their colonialist master plan. African involvement in the slave trade and colonialism under colonial rule had a strong impact on contemporary African art. 2 Art represents and “expresses the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas that are the result of their experience.” While Africans have been viewed as subhuman and barbarous, their art has also been and continues to be viewed as such.

Under colonial domination, the classification of African art as “tribal” initiated and continued into the era of contemporary African art. Sculpture continues to be a popular form of art in African culture, but because of colonialism, themes and perceptions have shifted. 3 When the colonizers arrived in Nigeria, they did not see African sculptures as art. For example, sculptures, totems, and masks reflect the religious, fertility, and other various social contexts of Africans, which have been distorted and underappreciated. Colonists and Christian missionaries did not recognize the religious and social practices of the African countries, so they did not understand their associated works of art. Inadvertently, it seems as though this divergence in our understanding today of African artifacts has been linked to the rampant pillage of the European colonizers.

In many ancient cultures, there were complex writing systems that archaeologists and linguists are still trying to decode. 4 The written framework of the Mayan language, for instance, remained a mystery to many scholars until the 20th century. They were one of North America's most powerful pre-Columbian civilizations, and their tombs and ancient texts in Central America are inscribed with a collection of square glyphs or symbols. A number of archaeologists have been collaborating with linguists and poets to preserve the formerly lost Mayan language.

As most of the archaeologists of this period were wealthy travelers, explorers, and merchants compared to amateur archaeologists who were genuinely interested in the culture and artifacts they were studying. Their work is often seen over time as an instance of colonialism and exploitation.

The impact of colonialism on art is now a part of African history, not something that can be fixed or removed from it. Dissecting an aspect of the history of Africa, which is often ignored, provides insight into the depth of the influence of the colonizers.