Critical Standards of African Art

Léopold Sédar Senghor
translated by Brian Quinn

Poet, thinker, and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor is best known as one of the founders of the Négritude movement and as the first president of his native Senegal at its independence in 1960. His life story reflects the challenges of a rising group of French-educated African intellectuals during the colonial period. He spent formative years as a student in Paris, where he attended the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand and became an agrégé in grammar, his lifelong commitment to the defense of Francophonie as a unifying global concept earned him a chair at the French Academy in 1983.

As the poet-president of Senegal, Senghor sought to unite the country’s plurality of languages and ethnic identities, although as a devout Catholic of Serer origin, he neither reflected the majority religion of Islam nor was he a native speaker of the country’s first national language of Wolof. Senghor’s defenders argue that he laid the foundation of today’s secular state and set a lasting model of religious and ethnic tolerance. Detractors point to the silencing of voices critical of his embrace of the so-called universal values of French culture.

Senghor envisioned Négritude, the movement he founded with Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas, as reflecting “the whole of black civilization’s values,” seeing black culture as a full-throated affirmation of African identity. In 1966, his vision reached its apotheosis with the First World Festival of Black Arts, in Dakar. But Senghor’s thought was also the target of fierce criticism from fellow Pan-Africanists such as Nigerian author Wole Soyinka and Martinican essayist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. Furthermore, Senghor spent his career rebutting the understanding of Négritude as an “anti-racist racism,” a phrase memorably coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Senghor’s seminal Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache (1948).

Scholarly responses to Senghor’s work have often deemed his language fundamentally essentialist and favorable to the very racial stereotypes it aims to critique. However, recent years have seen a critical reconsideration of Senghor’s ideas. In this vein, philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne (in African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Négritude, 2011) has pointed out Senghor’s elevation of art to the realm of philosophy, while historian Gary Wilder (Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World, 2014) has reevaluated Négritude as a radical, world-making project focused on the historic potentialities of an unknown postcolonial era.

—Brian Quinn, translator

A country, like a continent, can be described in myriad ways. Manuals of all kinds can tell us, in color, about the relief of a place’s landscape, the itineraries of its major passageways, its economy and history, its vision of God and the Universe, its understanding of time, and its desire to preserve, for its dead, timeless caverns nestled among the ages.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, born in Joal, Senegal in 1906, was the author of a number of collections of poetry in French as well as philosophical books, most notably on the Négritude movement, which he helped to found and defended throughout his long career. One of the most prominent politicians of post-independence Africa, Senghor served as Senegal’s first president and is today considered one of the country’s founding fathers.

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But history, geography, ethnography, and anthropology all fall short in depicting, in all of its fullness and nuance, man’s journey on this planet.

Before it even occurred to man to arrange his screams into language, his hand weighed, measured, signaled, and thought.

At play for art in any human agglomeration described by natural borders is the story of the close relationship between thought and hands. This is why art alone expresses the depths of human consciousness. It elucidates the nightmares that lurk in darker corners, gives worldly and otherworldly dimensions to dreams, and reinvents the colors of life with the inexhaustible resources of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms.

Just as Surrealism was born out of the chaos of war’s aftermath and amidst the schools of uprooted artists in search of new modes of life and expression, just as it was born of an interpretation of the world beyond a sclerotic formalism and offered “a complete revision of all values,” Negro Art, that sedentary product of peace, that illustration of an ancient culture, emerged with its clean lines from the hands of a man who faced the sky and attempted to make order of his internal chaos.

Whereas even before the medieval period artistic movements melded and converged in subterraneous shifts toward the explosion of the Renaissance, Africa, for millenniums, remained within a sovereign solitude. Into that solitude it introduced cosmogenic obsessions in response to the vital forces it attempted to define and tame.

It is said of traditional African art that it is primitive. This is true in the sense of the Latin primitivus: “the first of its kind.” We are not afraid of words, even when, as in our time, their use can cause semantic wear and tear. It is primitive in that it is linked to the cosmos and has held tight to the vital sources of emotion, the psychic reserves of ancient cities. It has stayed close to the gods, then to God.

One may reproach certain exegetes of Negro art, nonetheless full of good intentions if not merit, for lecturing at length or labeling it for the museum. To expound on this art some have used the refined tool of discursive logic, which sidesteps the emotional imbuement of a mask or a statuette. Others translate it through the conventional formulae of modern plastic surgery. But the Negro soul is a product of its environment. In this case the action is deeply steeped in its surroundings: in the primitively pure light that crosses the savanna, and in the far reaches of the forest, where civilizations are born. It is steeped in this raw and scrutinizing light that brings out the essential and the essence of things, or in this climate whose fierceness both exalts and subdues. In any case, the Negro soul, too, explains to us art, religion, and society.

I acknowledge that it is no small task to achieve, without sacrifice, the state of grace required to be in communion with Negro art. One does not easily traverse this immeasurable gap that spiritually separates the contemporary civilized individual, fed on logic and reason, from his distant ancestor, who did not create his art but lived it, integrating it into his cave, hut, or sacred wood, and into the rituals of the family, clan, or tribe.

So many points of contact have disappeared, so many sources run dry. So many treasures of the three kingdoms have been swallowed up by the sandy ocean of the Sahara. The researcher can only hope to weld the broken links of hypotheses, composing a total vision that is as close as possible to the historical truth. Here I will restate, more or less, what I wrote in L’Homme de Couleur and, in 1956, in the review Diogène.
cultural sources of this artistic production, to the ancient cultural tradition of black Africa.

Last year I said that the First World Festival of Negro Arts was not “an antiquarian’s empty display, but an articulate demonstration of our deepest, or our most genuine culture.” I added that, “partaking at all times—but at a distance and through intermediaries—in the building of the universal civilization, united, reunited Africa offers the waiting world, not a gigantic tattoo, but the sense of her artistic creation. These works speak of our outlook, our obsession with mankind as with the invisible God: they also express our wish that the earth may alter to receive the light of heaven.”

I must point out, without false modesty, that the premises advanced nearly thirty years ago as part of the phenomenon of artistic creation in black Africa have contributed to a broader global discussion of which the review and movement Présence Africaine has proved a key locus if not a catalyzer.

Researchers and scholars have been liberated, in their research, from the laboratory of cool reason and mathematical rules. They now strive to come into contact with a perceptible and complex geographical zone that was once an area of high spirituality, where superior Forces still mark the time of seasonal rhythms.

We have not only been observed from afar and from across borders of indifference, but also from above, from the skyscrapers of Western civilization, cut off from nature and from God. They sought to gaze upon us, but not to understand us. They measured us without sympathetically seeking to plumb our hearts or our soul. It is perhaps our rites that most disoriented our visitors, who stood before the mask or the statuette as would a tourist seeking out the unusual or the unseen, not in order to learn, but to fill a travel diary. They approached us as one might a zoo, for amusement and relaxation, in the idleness of a Sunday afternoon.

But already, fed by the Stoics’ teaching, Porphyry affirmed that “primitive men were as averse to cutting down a plant or a tree as they were to killing an animal, since for them the plants were animate.” Captain Rattray picks up the same idea in his work entitled Religion and Art in Ashanti: “the wandering spirit [of the tree sacrificed to make a stool or drum] ... is expected, and in fact is actually enticed, to enter once again the material substance where it dwelt when the tree was yet alive. This explains the subsequent rites of consecration of the completed stool or the completed drums.”

People ask, with skepticism, what we have contributed to the world. The Negro contribution to the world of the twentieth century can, above all, be felt in literature and in art more broadly. The separation of the plastic arts and music is merely a practical matter. One finds the same elements here and there between the African and the Afro-American, regardless of what the specialists say. The accomplishment of the American ordeal will have been to do away with all that was not permanent and human.

But these contributions will only have been of use to the rare artist. They are generally transformed into fragmentary borrowings, emptied of their lifeblood, hallow in spirit. I feared that the Surrealists themselves might not have always harbored discreet, that is to say enlightened, sympathies for the Negro. However, since the newly revised and corrected edition of Surrealism and Painting (1928–1965) by André Breton, it would be correct to acknowledge that a new light was shed on artistic expression in the utterance of two principles that revolutionized the idea of the artwork. They are as follows:

1. “In order to respond to the necessity, upon which all serious minds now agree, for a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist.

2. “The revolutionary significance of a work, or quite simply its significance, should never be subordinated to the choice of elements that the work brings into play.”
Our world is still in the service of matter and, by extension, of reason. One denounces reason only to declare the primacy of material. This is the attitude of Théophile Gautier: “My protesting body refuses to acknowledge the supremacy of the soul and my flesh does not consent to be mortified...” Three things I like: gold, marble, crimson; brilliance, solidity, color. Preferences may change, but not spirit, by which I mean absence of spirit. This gives us Baudelaire’s attacks on “The Pagan School,” or the attacks of Cézanne and Gauguin, whose research advances into the camp of Negro art to the point of encounter.

For the virtue of Negro art is that it is neither a game, nor a pure aesthetic delight, but that it signifies.

Here I will choose the most indicative of the arts, sculpture. Even the decoration of the most basic utensil of common use does not undermine its goal like a vain ornament, but rather highlights it. This is a tactile art, not a utilitarian one, and classical in this same sense. It is a spiritual art—incorrectly labeled “idealistic” or “intellectual”—because of its religiosity. The essential function of sculpture is to represent the Ancestors and spirits with statues that are symbolic (symbol) and a receptacle. The idea is to capture, to feel their individual soul as a clear form of will, to reach the surreal through human representation, specifically through the representation of the human form, the most accurate reflection of the soul. It is a striking aspect of anthropomorphic statues, and masks most of all, this constant concern for the intermediary-man.

This spirituality is expressed through the most concrete elements of the real. The Negro artist is less a painter than a sculptor, less a drawer than a molder, working with his hands with solid, three-dimensional material, like the Creator. He chooses the most concrete matter. Rather than bronze, ivory, or gold, he prefers wood, which is widely found and lends itself to both the broadest effects and the most delicate nuances. He uses few colors, or uses them to the point of saturation: white, black, and red, the colors of Africa. Above all he uses lines, surface, and volume: the most material properties of matter.

But because this art tends toward the essential expression of the object, it is the opposite of subjective realism. The artist arranges the details within a hierarchy that is spiritual and, therefore, technical. Where many could only see clumsy hands or a failure of observation, there is, in fact, a view for order or, rather, for subordination. I have already stated the importance the artist attributes to the human face.

This organizing force that composes the Negro style is rhythm. It is the most perceptible and least material element. It is the vital element par excellence. It is the first condition and the sign of art, as respiration is of life, accelerating or slowing down, becoming regular or fitful according to the person’s strain, or the degree and nature of the emotion. So it goes with rhythm, primitively, in its pure state, as in the masterworks of Negro art and especially in sculpture. It is composed of a theme—sculptural form—which opposes a related theme, like inspiration to respiration, and then it repeats. The symmetry does not lead to monotony. Rhythm is alive and free. Reprisals are neither recapitulation nor repetition. The theme is taken up again from a different angle, within another scheme or combination, with variation. It gives a different intonation, timbre, and accent, and the overall effect is intensified with nuance. This is how rhythm acts on that which is the least intellectual in us. It does so despotically, to pull us into the spirituality of the object. And this attitude of release within us is, itself, rhythmic.

This is classical art in the most human sense, that of “controlled
Art plastique, non pas utilitaire, et classique au sens dernier, illustrant une réalité, est-il dit d’une idéalité ou d’intellectuel — parce que religieux. Les sculpteurs ont pour fonction essentielle de représenter les Annonciations et Oeuvres de grâce par des statues, en même temps, symboles et héritières. Il s’agit de faire faire sentir, leur image personnelle comme volonté efficace, de faire succéder à nous un personnage, par une représentation humaine, singulière par la représentation de la figure humaine, reflétant le plus fidèlement de l’âme. Le fait est frappant, que les statues anthroposkopiques et pariétaux, les masques précédemment, sont couverts de l’homme-auto-médiateur.

Cette spiritualité s’exprime par les éléments les plus concrets du réel. L’artiste négro est moins poétique que sculpteur, moins démoniaque qu’auteur, travaillant de ses mains, la seule matière à trois dimensions comme le Château. Il choisit la matière la plus concrète, de préférence en brume, à l’œuvre, le bois, qui est commun et se prête aux efforts les plus brutaux comme aux plus délicats maîtres. Il se sert de peu de couleurs, quel que soit il fait, toujours, fracas jusqu’à saturation du bleu, le noir et le rouge, couleurs de l’Afrique; il se sent nettoyant des lignes, des surfaces, du volume des propriétés des plus matérielles de la matière.

Mais parce que cet art tend à l’expression essentielle de l’objet, il est l’émissaire du véritable sujet. L’artiste ne peut les déguisés à l’intérieur spirituelle et, surtout, technique. La nuissance vient sourir voilé que moulage simple des mains ou incapable d’oublier de le voir, il y a bien volonté d’imitation, même de subordination. J’ai déjà dit l’importance accordée au visage humain par l’artiste. Cette force ordinaire qui fait la force négro est le rythme. C’est le choc la plus soulevée et la moins matérielle. C’est l’élément vital pour la plupart. Il est le signe que l’âme, le but de la dévotion, l’art comme la respiration de la vie, la respiration qui se précipite au solitaire, éveillant négativement au dans, minant la tempe de l’esprit, les degrés et la qualité de l’émotion. Tel est le rythme primitivement, dans sa première, tel est dans les chefs-d’œuvre de l’art négro, particulièrement de la sculpture. Il est fait d’un thème — thème sculptural — qui s’oppose à un thème vivant, comme l’inspiration à l’inspiration et qui se repend. Ce n’est pas la symétrie qui tendant à nous envahir le rythme est vivant, il est libre. Car encore n’est pas ordinaire, ni répétitif. Le thème est repéré à une autre place, sur un autre plan, dans une autre combinaison, dans une autre variation, et il donne une autre composition, un autre timbre, un autre accent. Et l’effet d’émotion, de choc est sans mesure. C’est ainsi que le rythme agit sur ce qu’il y a de moins intellectuellement en nous, dépouillant-pour nous faire pénétrer dans la spiritualité de l’objet, et cette attitude d’abandon qui est noble est l’effet même rythmique.

Art classique en usant le plus humain du mot, parce que romanesque donnant, parce que Farfante, dominant sa manière émotive, mûr et conduit notre émotion jusqu’à l’âme. Par les moyens les plus simples, les plus directs, les plus détaillés. Tout concourant au fait, nourricière, vaiselle, fleur, bien qui distille. En renouant de nous néohéros, l’artiste nous conquiert. Art classique comme le définit Martinet: “Subordination telle de la matière à la lumière de la forme,... qu’esthétisme matériel provenant des chocs ou d’où le ne sortit admis dans l’oeuvre qui se sert strictement requis comme support ou comme véhicule de cette lumière et qui vienne abordée ou ‘d’abord’ Feuille, l’âme ou l’esprit.”

Ce qui manque à la musique du XIXe siècle faisant, ce ne fut pas les idées, ni une spiritualité authentique, il suffit de citer, pour la France, César Franck ou le condition de Faure”, mais une âme jeune et des moyens neufs. Dieu est invisible aux humains, enserré dans l’âme, la belle, le ralentissement de règles conventionnelles et des lois, les Claude Debussy, Darius Milhaud et Igor Stravinsky. Ils allèrent à la découverte d’univers inconnus et de “verts invisibles.”

C’est à ses beaux vers que répond la musique négro, qui commence d’être sérieusement étudiée en Europe; et donc, il est impossible à en faire des efforts, de faire des efforts, de faire du mal bien dans ta technique. Non plus que la sculpture, elle est neutre, dans l’âme, un art qui se suffisent à lui-même. Elle accompagne, président, les danse et les chants rituels. Précisément, elle se fait pas indispensable, elle a un place chez elle dans des manifestations collectives de théâtre, des travaux agricoles, des communautés. Même dans les quadrilles, noms de la musique, ne sont pas pure manifestatio esthétique, mais fait, concept, plus intégré, ses effets à sa nature institutionnelle de la communauté dominante du monde dominante. Il en est resté beaucoup chez les négroes accoutumées, auto-médiateurs. Inexactement, ils dessinent leur musique, ils dessinent leur vie.


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Finally, Etienne Souriau points out that, “thanks to the body, the limit of one’s self is anchored to the world, as the body is solidly embedded as a physical thing within the cosmos of things.”

This is to say that Negro music, like sculpture and dance, is enrooted in the nourishing soil. It is filled with rhythms, sounds and noises of the earth. That is not to say that it is descriptive or impressionistic. It also conveys sentiment, though it is not sentimental. It brings the necessary lifeblood to a Western music that is diminished by its foundation and its reliance on rules that are abstract and often too rigid.

I will not speak about the melodic contributions, which are obvious. This area has been the most thoroughly explored, much more so than the modal field. This is, in part, because the “experts” have denied the existence of a Negro harmony, despite the protests of seasoned musicians like Ballanta, who point out that Negros sing in choruses. Unlike most popular songs of other peoples, which are sung in unison, choruses in Negrété are sung in several parts. I can personally recall how the good Father who directed our chorus struggled to keep us singing in unison, without parts or variation. In talking about Negro choruses, Delafosse once noted that, “the harmony in it was impeccable.” “The rhythmic and melodic inventiveness is prodigious (and almost naive),” wrote Gide, who continues, “...but what can be said of that harmony! This is what most surprised me. I expected these songs to be monochromatic since that’s the reputation they’ve been given,
It is indeed disconcerting, as it would be impossible to write down the intervals or the melodic and rhythmic patterns, which are of great subtlety. “Our popular songs,” Gide says, “next to the basic chords, out of which surges the melody. Here, I must therefore identify with the negro interpretation. It is the particular way of encircling a note, the sound, with a halo of flesh and blood, that makes it appear so murky and seductive, this ‘naive’ way of conveying, with the most sensual of voices, the most secret spirituality. “The Soloist,” writes Gide, “has an admirable voice, of a quite different kind, the pebble and God.”

Notes

Without any ‘songs in thirds or sixths.’ But this polyphony through a widening and overwhelming swell of sound is so disorienting for our Northern ears that I doubt we would even manage to note it through any of our graphic means.

It is in the field of rhythm that the Negro contribution was the most important and the least controversial. We have seen throughout this study that the Negro is a rhythmic being. He is rhythm incarnate. Music, in this sense, is revelatory. One notices that it is far from mechanic. It is marked by its consistency and variety, tyranny and fantasy, anticipation and surprise. This explains why the Negro can delight for hours in the same musical phrase, because it is not at all the same.

Outside of strictly musical elements, the Negro has shown the resources one can draw from certain instruments that had been ignored or arbitrarily confined to a subaltern role. Such was the case of percussive instruments, including the xylophone, as well as the saxophone and brass instruments, the trumpet and the trombone. Thanks to the clarity, the forcefulness, the nobility of their tone, these are all designated to produce the Negro style. This is also thanks to the sweet gentleness and mystery extracted from them since the best musicians of hot jazz.

Negro influence is not only perceptible, does not only promise to be fruitful, in music composition, but also in performance. This is perhaps where the Afro-Americans have remained closest to the source. It is above all a matter of style and of soul.

Hugues Panassié has made clear the Negro contribution in hot jazz, whose defining characteristic is in the performance. But this influence has yet to be extended to classical music, and perhaps concerns more the singers than the orchestra. The value of performance is in the intonation, which Panassié defines as “Not only the way of attacking a note, but also the way of holding it, of letting it go, in short, of giving it its full expression. It is,” he adds, “the expression, the accent that the performer imprints on each note, through which he conveys all of his personality.” As faithful as the performances of great artists like Roland Hayes or Marian Anderson are, there is always an element of Negro interpretation. It is the particular way of encircling a note, the sound, with a halo of flesh and blood, that makes it appear so murky and seductive, this “naïve” way of conveying, with the most sensual of voices, the most secret spirituality. “The Soloist,” writes Gide, “has an admirable voice, of a quite different kind, the pebble and God.”

Limited though they may be, these Negro contributions have influenced contemporary music quite deeply. Out of them comes music with a richer, more pared-down nature, one that is more muscular and supple, dynamic and generous. It is more human and therefore more natural. The old myth of Antaeus has not lost any of its variety.

It is with this Greek myth that I would like to conclude. There is nothing strange about this juxtaposition of the Negro and the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece. It is the treason of the modern world, which has mutilated man by turning him into a “rational man,” rather than the Greek. I fear that, today, many who lay claim to the Greeks betray Greece.

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