

Johnson, Ken. "Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,' Where Tradition Meets Avant-Garde," *New York Times*, 23 June 2016.

# The New York Times

## 'Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,' Where Tradition Meets Avant-Garde

By Ken Johnson



African masks had an enormous influence on the development of Modern art, as luminaries like Picasso, Matisse and Giacometti appropriated and interpreted their startling forms and materials. But what about modern artists of African descent? Do they have a distinct relationship of their own to that history? That's a question raised, if not definitively answered, by "[Disguise: Masks and Global African Art](#)," an intermittently edifying and generally entertaining exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

The show features pieces by 25 African artists and artists of African descent, whose works all relate in some way to masks and masquerade while involving neon lights, video projections, found objects, photography or other typical devices of the global avant-garde. Distributed among these new works is a selection of traditional African masks drawn from the esteemed collections of the Brooklyn Museum and the Seattle Art Museum.

Since at least as far back as the 1950s, mask-making in Africa has been a big industry in which craftsmen produce artificially aged new masks for a worldwide market. African art has given rise to its own form of kitsch, a décor for the masses. But the production of masks for popular consumption began long before that, when European colonizers began collecting tribal artifacts in the 19th century, and, in response, African craftsmen began to make works for the market that were separate from those created for their tribal ceremonies.

Then, largely thanks to Picasso's electrifying encounter with African masks around 1907 and the colleagues who followed suit, Europeanized African aesthetics became integral to Modern art. That development is skewered here by [William Villalongo](#)'s neatly made collages. In several, an African mask cut from a photograph has been glued over a woman's head in a reproduction of a painting by a European or an American, from a zaftig nude by Renoir to a pinup by the Pop artist Mel Ramos.