

According to Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski Africa is „a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos“. The mere size and complexity of the African continent, consisting of many hundreds of tribes and dozens of states, mirrors in its culture and art and it renders impossible to reduce the modern history of African art to fit into one thesis. This fact made me concentrate on changes which occurred during the 20th century within the field of theoretical writing on African art [see Introduction].

Europeans have shown their interest in Africa for thousands years since the antiquities, starting as early as the 5th century B.C. with Herodotus, followed by Arabic merchants, who crossed Sahara and described with astonishment growing medieval empires of Central Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhai. First period of greater interest is connected with 15th century European sailors, who were sent by their respective emperors to find gold, slaves and sale opportunities. This still leaves Europeans mainly on the African coast entering into the heart of Africa only after the colonial incursion in the late 19th century.

An enormous amount of artworks was brought to Europe from Africa during the years and decades to come after the Berlin conference 1884-85, which almost deprived some tribes from their indigenous culture. The same moment marks the beginning of two different stories of “modernity”. The first story [see Chapter 2-3] follows the discovery of African art accomplished by modern European artists at the beginning of the 20th century – so called “l’art ngre“ (Negro Art) inspired at that time the members of the French Fauvist and Cubist movements, as well as German Expressionists. The second story, which forms the second part of my thesis, [see Chapter 4-6] speaks about the proceeding of modernity within the African continent itself.