

French–Australian Shared Histories

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Imagination | Exploration | Memory



Australia and Picasso

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At first sight, Picasso's relationship with Australia may seem rather tenuous. Picasso the artist was not a traveller but he knew how to travel through time and space thanks to his personal collection and his private archives which reveal two links to this country. Firstly there is the link that Picasso weaves through primitive arts. This is how, indirectly, he came to be interested in Australia: primitivism gave him an appreciation of it, originally through the region – the Pacific and Oceania region – more than through any historical or ethnographic knowledge of the objects he collected. The photographs held in the archives of the Musée Picasso clarify this interest and the quality of these Oceanic objects. Later, the links that associate Australia and Picasso belong more to the post-World War II Australia: Australian artists, intellectuals and cultural institutions looked to Picasso as an inspiring figure who was both committed and able to help in forging Australia's young modern art.

Initially, Picasso – very much like other contemporary artists – had an indirect association with Australia and focused on Oceania in the geographical sense of the word. Among his contemporary artists, Picasso was considered the closest to primitivism, so the definition of primitivism and Oceanic art deserves a mention. Primitivism is a 19th century notion that comes from the history of art: it is an imitation of primitive artists, a western phenomenon not to be confused with the art of so-called primitive peoples. In the 19th century definition, only primitive artists changed contours and sense, since the term described both the Flemish and Italians of the Middle Ages. Later the term would describe African and Oceanic tribal artists, but only in the 20th century. Even in the early 20th century, the term 'primitive' could encompass Persian, Egyptian, Pre-Columbian and even Javanese, Cambodian or Japanese art, that is, any non-European court art.

This term 'primitive' belongs to a western vision of tribal arts, an ethno-centric vision that does not focus on tribal arts per se, but rather on the interest and reaction that such arts have elicited among westerners: primitivism is, therefore, an aspect of modern art, and not an aspect of tribal art.¹ First it was called Tribal or Indigenous art, and later it became African and Oceanic arts, at a time when the term came to encompass the study of these arts themselves, with their roles and their meanings in the societies that had created them. Picasso and his contemporaries used the term 'black' arts to refer indistinctly to both African art and Oceanic art and to primitive art in general. The terms were interchangeable. For example, Picasso used to say that he was going 'black hunting' each time he visited a port city where he might be able to find tribal sculptures, as in August 1912, when he travelled to Marseille in the company of Braque. Cocteau often wrote to him 'I have found you some blacks' referring to African or Oceanic art sculptures. The use of this term expressed an anti-academia attitude, the desire to make the bourgeois howl: in the language of the 20th century it was becoming a compliment to describe an art piece as 'primitive'.

Picasso's interest in Oceanic art goes back to 1907. In June that year, he visited the Trocadero, where he discovered the ethnography museum which he subsequently visited several times with André Derain and Guillaume Apollinaire.² His account reflects the prevailing confusion in the knowledge of these objects: Picasso had no idea about their context, roles or true meaning:

¹ On this issue, see *Le Primitivisme dans l'art du 20^e siècle, les artistes modernes devant l'art tribal*, edited by William Rubin, Paris, Flammarion, 1988, p. 2-3.

² For a timeline, see *Picasso primitif*, edited by Yves Le Fur, Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, Flammarion, 2017, p. 343.

When I discovered black art forty years ago, and that I painted what they call my black period, I did it to defy the museum definition of beauty. At the time, for most people, a black mask was only an ethnographic object. When I first visited the Trocadero museum with Derain, a mouldy smell of neglect grabbed me by the throat. I was so depressed that I wanted to leave immediately. But I forced myself to stay, to examine these masks, all these objects that people had made for some sacred, magical purpose, to serve as their intermediaries with the unknown, hostile forces that surrounded them, thus attempting to overcome their fear by giving them some colour and a shape. And then I understood that this was the very sense of painting. It is not an aesthetic process; it is some sort of magic that stands between the hostile universe and us, empowering us by imposing a shape on our terrors and desires. The day I understood this, I knew that I had found my way'.³

In late June – early July 1907, Picasso completed his *Les Femmes d'Alger* and described the painting as an exorcism, because at this time he was extracting a new attitude from primitive arts, rather than an inventory of forms: he was gaining an awareness of the production of art as a magic act. Shortly after that, at the age of 25, he began his African and Oceanic art collection.⁴ One of the oldest photos of Picasso's Bateau-Lavoir workshop in 1908 shows his first tribal objects including New Caledonian ridge poles, of a rather ordinary manufacture. Picasso was, then, one of the first artists to collect Oceanic art in France, which is particularly remarkable since Oceanic objects were less plentiful in 1905–19 Paris than African ones, and much more expensive at that.

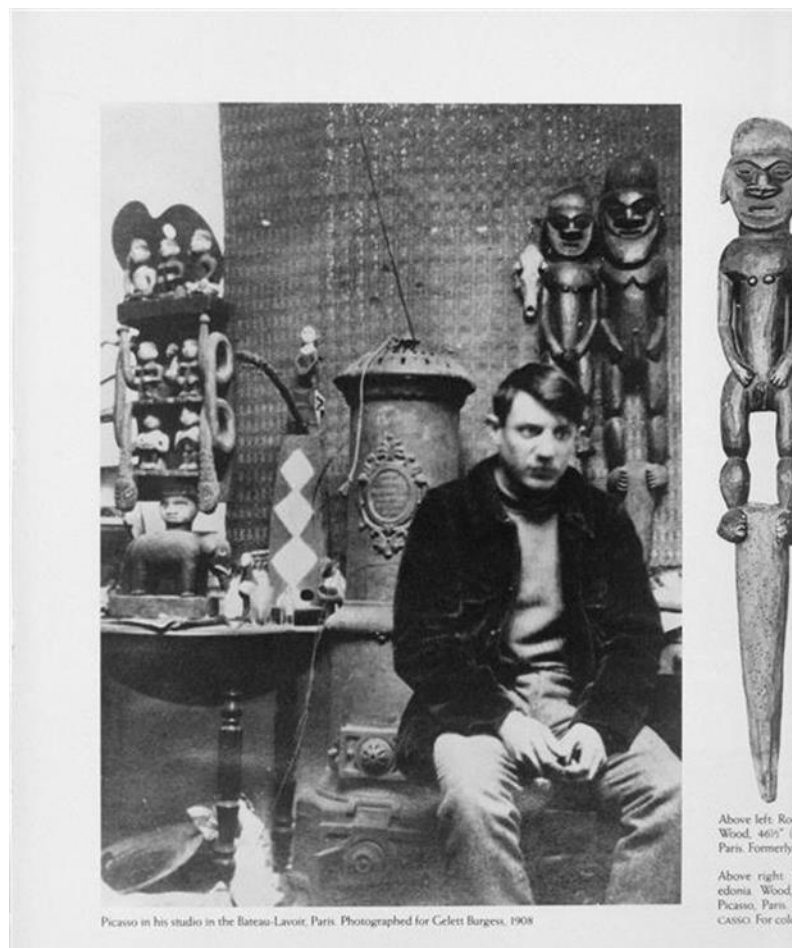


Fig. 1. Picasso at his Bateau Lavoir workshop, 1908.
Illustration taken from Gelett Burgess' article 'The Wild Men of Paris' (*Architectural Record*, 5 May 1910), documentation from the Musée national Picasso-Paris

³ Françoise Gilot, Carlton Lake, *Vivre avec Picasso*, Calmann-Levy, 1964, p. 248 of the 1973 edition.

⁴ For details of the indigenous objects in the personal collection see Peter Stepan, *Picasso's collection of African and Oceanic Art, Masters of Metamorphosis*, Prestel, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, 2006, p. 149.



Fig. 2. Male and female sculptures: ridge poles, undated. New Caledonia, wood, 126 X 19cm / 118.5 x 16cm. Musée national Picasso-Paris, gifted in 1979, MP3643 and MP3644

Picasso only had a fuzzy knowledge of this Oceanic art, which bears witness, primarily, to another world. At this time, his actual knowledge was associated with Gauguin's primitivism and Polynesia, within the Oceanic space, yes, but not at all in Australia, as he began his collection one year after the 1906 autumn salon where Gauguin's works were exhibited and were already attracting artists to Polynesia. Kahnweiler, the art dealer, used to say he had seen a French Polynesian Tiki at Picasso's workshop at the Bateau-Lavoir, before the end of 1907. The French Polynesian Tiki, purchased from Paul Heymann in Paris, is the only good quality object in Picasso's primitive art collection that we can safely say belonged to him before World War I.



Fig. 3. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)
Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire at the workshop at 11 Boulevard de Clichy, Paris, autumn of 1910.
 Silver gelatine print, 21.7 x 17.3 cm
 Musée national Picasso-Paris, Picasso Archives, APPH 2817

The sculptural and architectural plastics of these Tiki is similar to African art, and differentiates them from Melanesian art. It is not by chance that during this period Picasso was concerned with sculptures; this explains why he began by collecting Polynesian art within Oceanic art. The famous photography of Lucien Clergue showing Picasso looking at the French Polynesian Tiki with a reverence combined with caution, reflects Picasso's belief in a supernatural power that inhabited these objects.



Fig. 4. Tiki from French Polynesia, 19th century, wood, 72cm. Picasso collection, Maya Picasso's collection, documented for the first time on the 1910 portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire by Picasso, see Fig. 3.

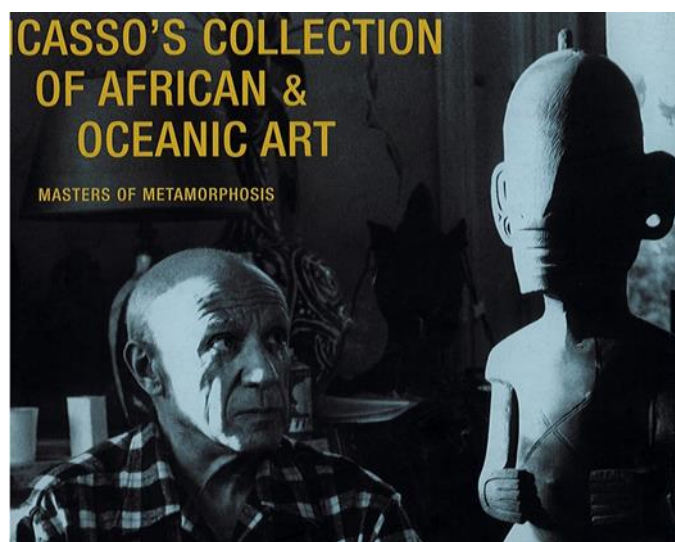
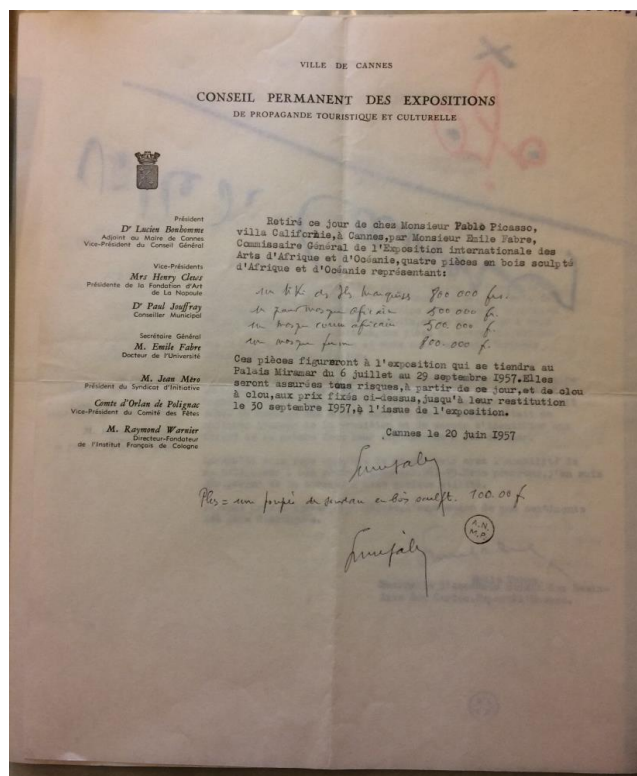


Fig. 5. Lucien Clergue

Picasso and the Tiki island sculpture, Villa La Californie, Cannes (detail) 4 November 1955.

The archives show that he loaned the French Polynesian Tiki to the Cannes exhibition of African and Oceanic arts of 1957, organised by Emile Fabre. The object was insured for a significant amount, and it gained further value from the fact that it was owned by Picasso.



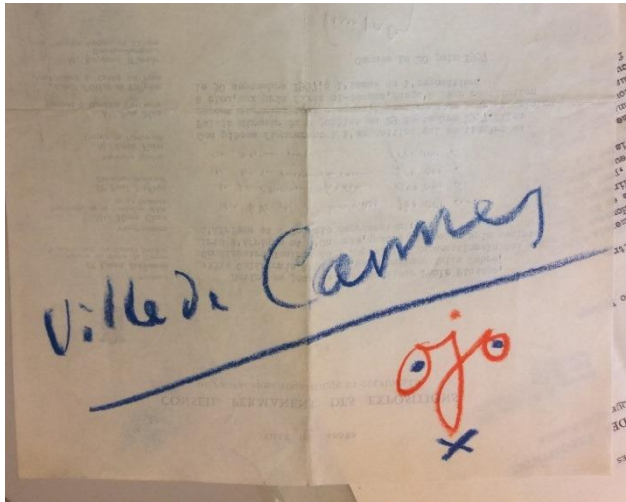


Fig. 6. Letter from Emile Fabre requesting the loan of the French Polynesian Tiki for the international exhibition of African and Oceanic arts in Cannes, 1957, and detail on the front of the letter of the ojo by Picasso, a sign that he affixed on important correspondence, and formed by the word ojo drawing a face with two eyes, a nose and a mouth. Picasso Archives, 515AP/E/18/2/3

Another high quality object from Picasso's personal collection at the time of the gifting in 1979 is a crouching figure, originating from the Sepik basin region in New Guinea, and dating from the 18th–19th century. It was purchased on 6 September 1944 from the Louis Carré gallery, and had been purchased earlier in 1931 from Drouot; this information is available in the Picasso archives.



Fig. 7. Worship figure, sculpture (fragment), undated, New Guinea, Sepik basin, wood, 45.5 X 20 x 17.5 cm. Gifted in 1979, MP3638, Musée national Picasso-Paris

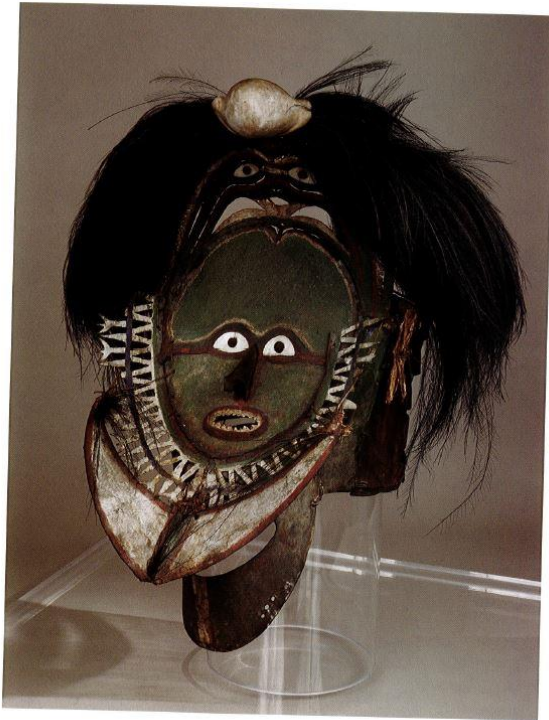


Fig. 8. Mask, Torres Strait, Australia, 19th century. Metal, paint, mother-of-pearl, shell, feathers, 49cm. Old Picasso collection (acquired in the twenties), private collection

This mask from the Torres Strait in Australia, bought in the 1920s, is the most beautiful Australian object in Picasso's collection. In the 1920s, Picasso shifted to higher quality objects and his knowledge enabled him to better differentiate between African and Oceanic art. In part, this was due to the development of the Parisian market for Oceanic and Melanesian objects. The term 'arts of Africa and Oceania' first started to emerge in the catalogues of exhibitions organised by dealers specialising in this field, such as Paul Guillaume. At the Exhibition of Indigenous Art of the French Colonies in 1923, Picasso was listed among the lenders of Oceanic pieces. In 1928, Count Etienne de Baumont organised a masked ball for which the masks, designed by Marcoussis, showed a synthesis of African and Oceanic forms, a sign of the spread of Oceanic forms among the avant-garde. At this time, Picasso purchased more Melanesian objects that look more fantastical and surreal than the less sculptural and more pictorial Polynesian pieces. Picasso was shifting increasingly towards surrealism, and Melanesian art responded more closely to his concerns at the time.

The *Nevimbumbau* sculpture, a dance body mask from the Vanuatu islands, previously known as the New Hebrides, in Melanesia, is a fetching example. Picasso had gone to see Matisse at the hotel Régina of Cimiez, and had admired this New Hebrides mask that Matisse had received as a gift from a friend, a ship captain. Its fantastical character made it ideal to please Picasso. It was given to Picasso by Pierre Matisse in 1957, after his father's death. It reigned supreme for years at the Villa La Californie and numerous photographs of the Musée Picasso confirm the fascination that this object held for the artist. This mask represents a mythical woman from Malekula Island, consisting of ferns with which the dancers would cover their head and torso. The chair on which the mask was placed originally was part of Matisse's furniture at the Cimiez hotel.

Françoise Gilot tells that the object had frightened Picasso initially:

And then people began to judge these masks in aesthetical terms; now, everybody keeps saying that there is nothing more beautiful, and they no longer interest me. For aesthetics only, I prefer a Chinese object. Furthermore, this thing from New Guinea scares me. It must scare Matisse as well, and that is why he wants to give it to me. Maybe he thinks that I'll be better able to exorcise it.⁵

Matisse insisted on giving it to him. But Picasso had been initially upset at the idea that Matisse may have thought that this object suited him better; he was upset to pass for someone with instincts, while, in his eyes, Matisse took the attitude of the intelligent painter who could not keep 'that thing' with such loud colours. According to Françoise Gilot, Matisse's gift conferred upon Picasso a feeling of inferiority, which could be explained by the Spaniard's sensitivity: 'Matisse thinks that I lack taste. He considers me to be a barbarian, and he thinks that this second-class tribal statue is right for me! This caricature is not good enough for him or for his elegant bourgeois apartment, but it should suit my place, the poor little guy from Malaga... I refuse to accept this frightening object'.⁶

Although for a long time he had rejected the object that Matisse had wanted him to have since 1950–51, at length Picasso accepted the present when he changed his mind after the death of Matisse.



Fig. 9. Ceremonial *Nevimbumbaa* headdress, undated, Vanuatu (New Hebrides, South Malekula), tree ferns and Pandanus palms covered in painted clay, 114 x 60 x 92cm, with chair, 135 x 63 x 92cm. Musée national Picasso-Paris, gifted in 1979. MP3624

⁵ Françoise Gilot, Carlton Lake, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

⁶ According to Peter Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 118.



Fig. 10. André Villers (1930–2016)
Nevimbumbaa sculpture in front of the rocking-chair in the workshop at La Californie, Cannes
Undated printing, silver gelatine print, 30.4 x 37.4 cm.
Musée national Picasso-Paris, acquisition, 1987, MP1987-118



Fig. 11. André Gomes
Nevimbumbaa and *Woman holding a child* at the workshop at La Californie, Cannes, in September 1958, undated printing, silver gelatine print, 29.7 x 23.7 cm.
Musée national Picasso-Paris, donation, Picasso estate, 1992, APPH3447



Fig. 12. André Villers

Pablo Picasso with a friend next to *Nevimbumbaa* in the workshop at La Californie, Cannes, in 1957, undated printing, silver gelatine print, 40.7 X 30.1cm.

Musée national Picasso-Paris, donation, Picasso estate, 1992, APPH2017

It could be said that Picasso shared common modalities of depiction and materials with Indigenous arts. He was interested in the plasticity of African art, which he wanted to associate to the colour of Oceanic art, and implemented the same conceptualisation of visual data and blending of fragments and recovered objects.

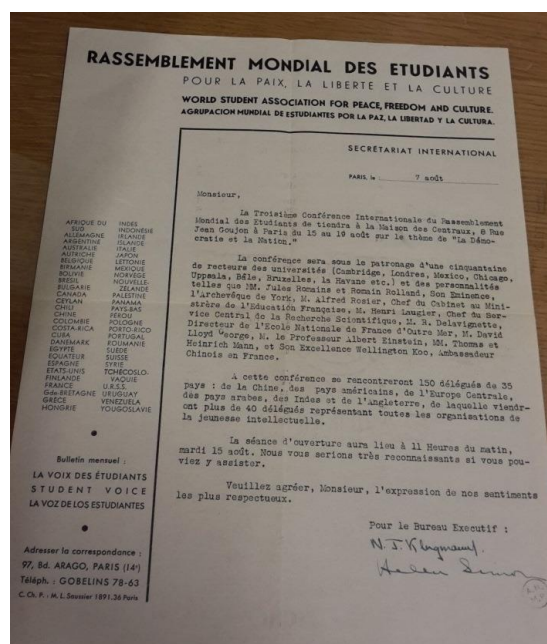


Fig. 13. World gathering of students for peace and culture, 7 August 1939, Archives Picasso, Donation Picasso estate, 1992, 515AP/E/17

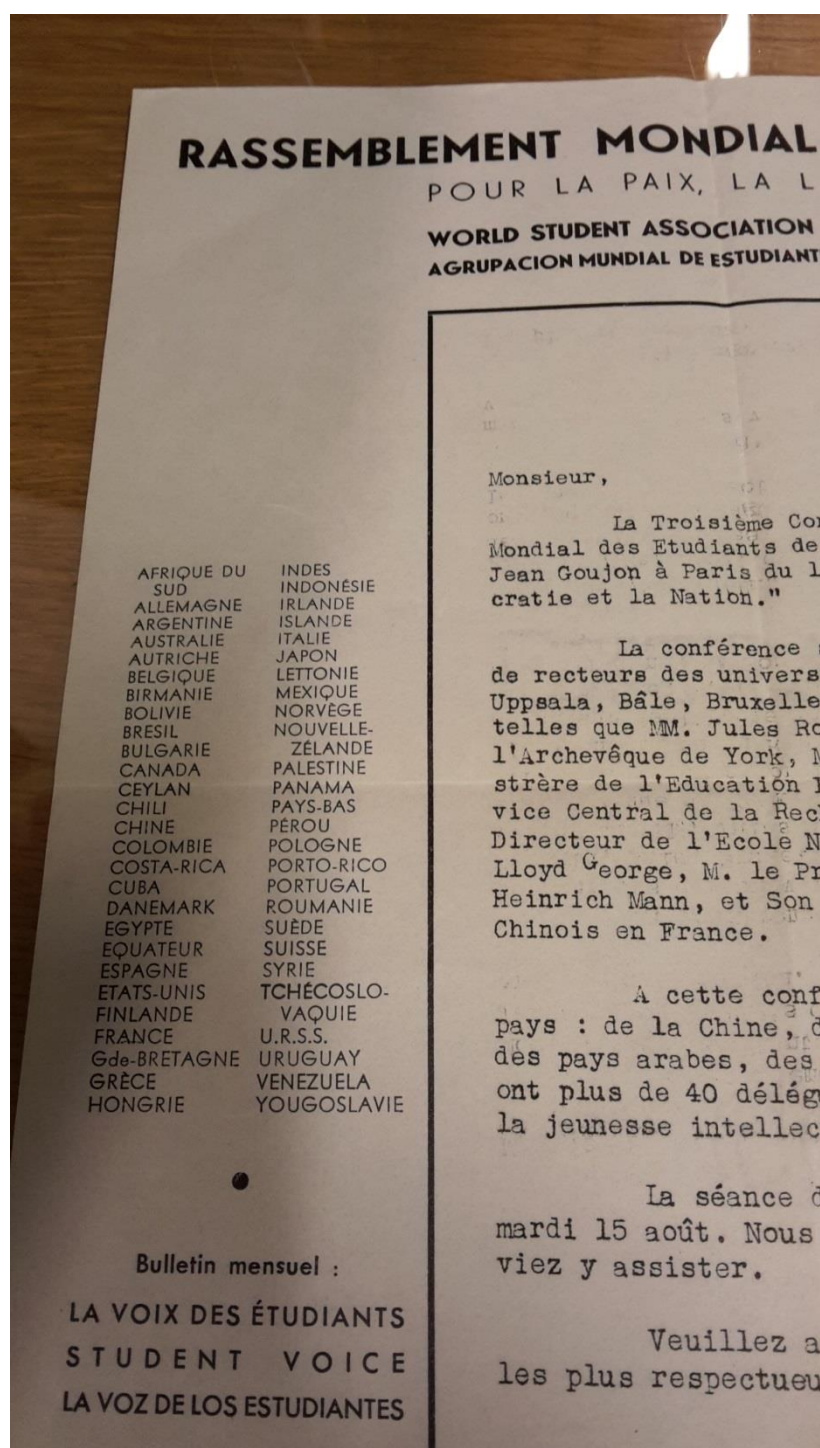


Fig. 14. World gathering of students for peace and culture, detail showing the participation of Australian student associations, 7 August 1939.

Archives Picasso, donation Picasso estate, 1992, 515AP/E/17

Artist associations and art schools from the entire world, including some from Australia in particular, used to write to Picasso. These were spontaneous messages from arts associations, and associations of intellectuals or students, to the Master. Since the Civil War, Picasso had been helping and collecting funds for Spanish refugees and exiled artists of any nationality. By extension, he was considered an example of the emancipator artist, the defender of freedom from Fascism and all totalitarian regimes. This global gathering of students, established at the World Congress of Students in Brussels in 1934, was held again in 1939, in a context of growing international tensions. It included student organisations from

Australian universities and promoted the participation of all student organisations in defending peace, freedom and culture, particularly university freedom, and freedom of thought and of scientific research, from obscurantism. Picasso was invited to take part.

The Studio of Realist Art (SORA) also sent Picasso several reports of its meetings, starting in 1945. This association was established at 171 Sussex Street, Sydney, on 2 March 1945 and later moved to 214 George Street. It organised courses and conferences until 1948.

Founding committee members included artists such as James Cant, Roy Dalgarno, Roderick Shaw, Hal Missingham, John Oldham, Adrian Galjaard, Bernard Smith, Herbert McClintock, and Dora Cant. SORA's purpose was to bring art closer to contemporary life. This association disagreed with the concept of art for art's sake, and sought to promote realism as the prime mover of postwar Australian art, in an attempt to move it out of its ivory tower. SORA campaigned for realistic art as well as an art that was connected to the environment and to Australians' daily life, so that it could be fully embraced by most Australians, and not reserved only for elite. The association offered night courses, and used reproductions and prints of ancient and modern works of art; it also organised conferences on the development of art practice in Australia. Picasso was kept updated on these conferences and was one of the painters whose reproductions were shown to students in drawing classes.

One of the conferences, presented by John Oldham at SORA on 29 April 1945, announced a new artistic era for Australia: a major program of public commissions was to be launched after the war – in schools, hospitals, post offices, banks and factories. All these establishments needed to display beauty to all Australians in their daily life. Art sponsors were changing, with the government becoming a patron, and patronage was not only a small group's privilege. During the war, the Allied Works Council had engaged the best Australian artists as official artists, and the Army had followed a more realistic approach in the telling of soldiers' feats, and recruited younger and less 'academic' artists. Four of the main Australian trade unions had even commissioned an artist, for the first time, to tell the story of men at work. Some of the major industrial companies were also trying to recruit artists to depict their works in the manner of an epic. These changes, as well as the recruitment by the Sydney Art Gallery of a person to organise itinerant art exhibitions, and the development of organisations such as CEMA – Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (1943) – would help Australia spread art throughout society. In 1947, the Arts Council of Australia was born out of CEMA; this would be a federation of artistic communities in Australia's states and territories.

The issue of contemporary art in the young country was at the core of correspondence. A telegram, which is difficult to date accurately but goes back to the fifties, requested Picasso's participation in the creation of Australia's Museum of Modern Art. The text of the telegram read: 'Foundation of Australia's Museum of Modern Art imminent. A brochure prepared on this occasion. No sense without your participation, as Australia isolated'. Its author was none other than Georges Mora, President of the Contemporary Art Society, which was headquartered at the Gallery of Contemporary Art. As a republican, he had been involved in the Spanish Civil War and had been forced to flee, which explains how he met Picasso as a political refugee. Later, he migrated to Australia and opened a café in Melbourne where avant-garde artists would often stay. The story goes that this was one of the first Melbourne cafés where you could have your coffee on a terrace, much like in Europe.

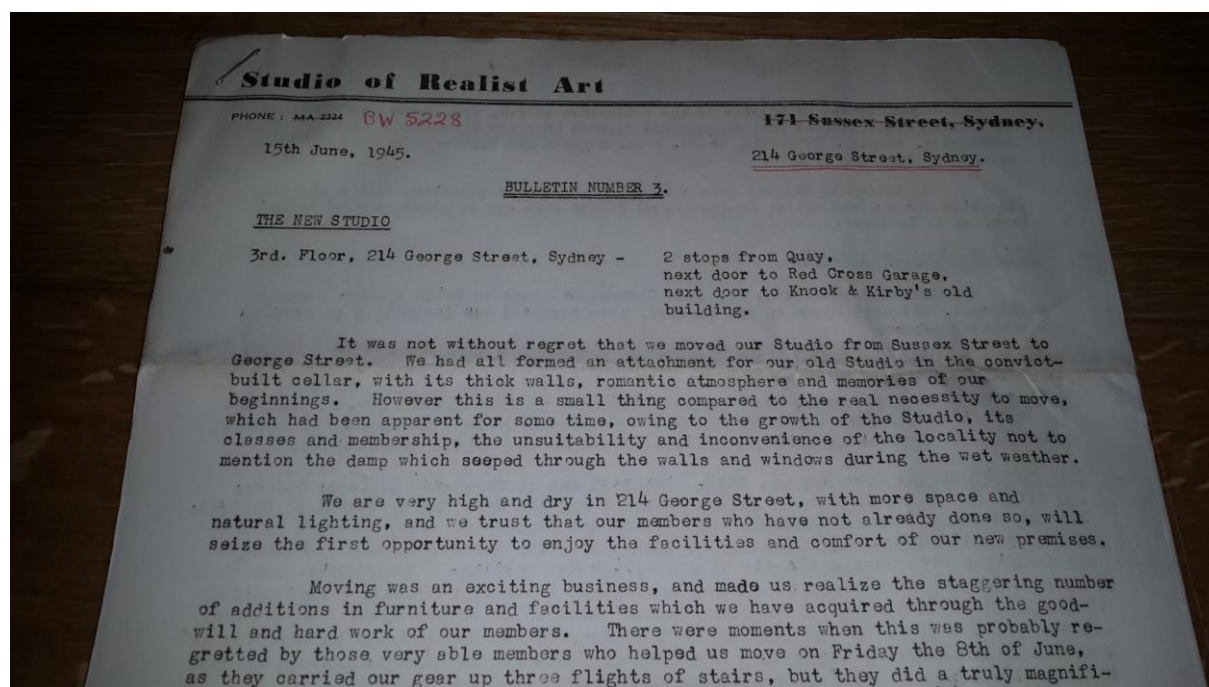


Fig. 15. Bulletins of the Studio of Realist Art from Sydney to Picasso, 1945.
Archives Picasso, donation Picasso estate, 1992, 515AP/E/23

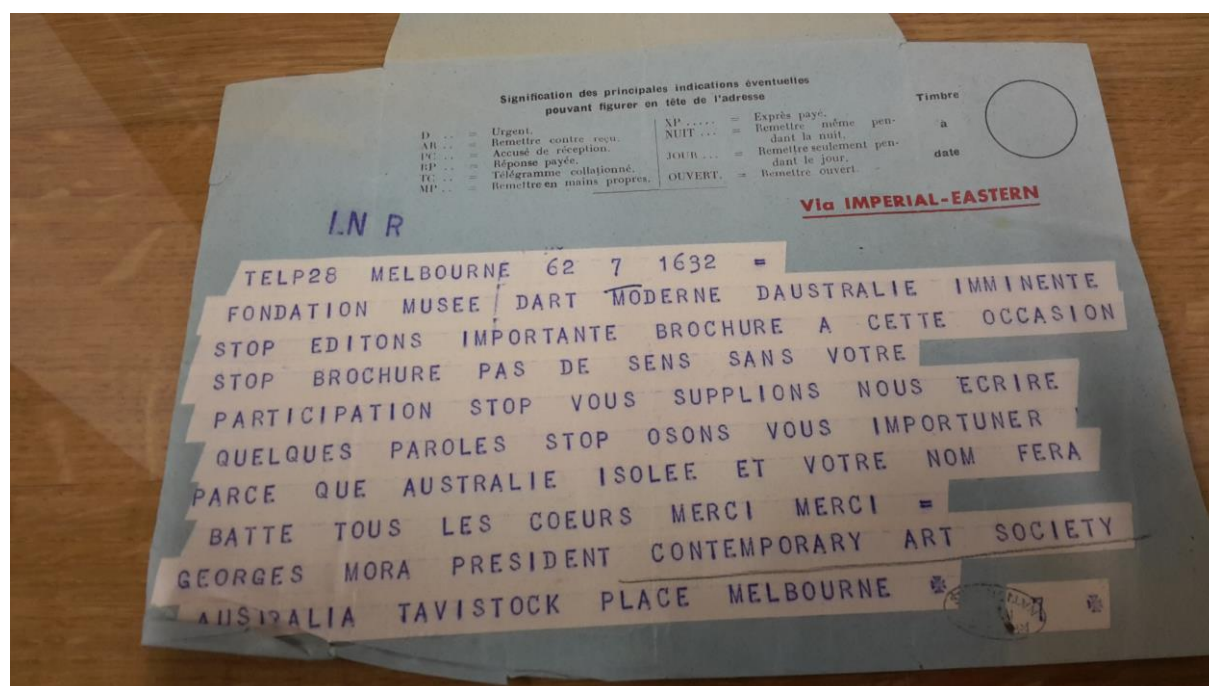


Fig. 16. Telegram from Georges Mora to Picasso (undated) c1950.
Archives Picasso, donation Picasso estate, 1992, 515AP/E/23

There is no doubt that other examples of Picasso's links with Australia can be found in the correspondence of artists or art dealers who sent Picasso their letters, their invoices, and their books, relating to Oceanic and Australian art. I have not touched upon Picasso's personal library where it may be possible to uncover such links, as well in the inscriptions and titles of works given to the Master. Picasso is one of those universal artists whose images have resonated well beyond Europe and the United States, and whose humanistic

commitment created a link with young nations like Australia that hoped to build a national and modern art – which it did with Sidney Nolan who was strongly influenced by Picasso and surrealism. Picasso gained international dimension during his life, and he was considered a global artist. There is a feeling of possible tension in Australia between modern art with universal tendencies, such as Picasso's, and a nation-specific, realistic art, with Picasso as a reference, but more of a mentor than a representative of a specific style.



Fig. 17. Words from Jean Cocteau to Picasso on the back of a photomontage by Jean Harold depicting Picasso as the chief of an African tribe, 10 September 1951.

Archives Picasso, donation Picasso estate, 1992, 515AP/C/29/1/194