Arrival Cities

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Introduction

As creations of an artist living between Senegal and France, the paintings of Iba N’Diaye embody the transnational discourses that are now the focus of art history as we reassess the sources, influences, and legacy of Modernism. This analysis focuses on the stylistic and technical influences of N’Diaye through his lived experiences in Paris during the 1950s, followed by a demonstration of how he adapted Modernist styles and themes upon his return to Senegal in 1958 – a synthesis he would continue developing after finally relocating to France around 1964. In contrast to his colleagues at the École des Arts du Senegal, Professor N’Diaye encouraged newly liberated African artists to engage with international discourses of Modernism, believing that these young artists would discover cultural emancipation that did not manifestly occur with the end of formal colonialism. As N’Diaye’s students learned formal studio techniques and studied art history – echoing the training and vision of modernity he absorbed in Paris – the students of other instructors intentionally ignored external (Western) referents and influences. N’Diaye’s work represents both an engaging example of Modernism that is colored by actively living in different world regions, as well as a vehicle for transmitting Modernist styles to West Africa and the global Black Diaspora. To that end, this analysis will conclude by briefly situating N’Diaye within a larger network of African Modernisms that simultaneously developed in mid-20th-century Paris. In contrast to the concept of center or terminus, Paris – as a space that is significant to the career of N’Diaye and other African Modernists – is characterized here as a single node on a complex framework of exchange. Rather a touchpoint, launching pad, or crossroads, this arrival city is over-credited when we name it the destination, haven, or Mecca.
Cities: Saint-Louis to Paris

Iba N’Diaye (b. 1928, Saint-Louis, Senegal; d. 2008, Paris, France) was born to a Muslim Wolof father and a Catholic mother. Though he would later face discrimination as an African artist and feel pressure to convey an aspect of *Africanité* in his painting, N’Diaye grew up in a multicultural family in one of the most cosmopolitan cities of West Africa. As the first permanent French establishment in Senegal, dedicated in 1659, Saint-Louis would change hands between the French and British over the next several centuries. In the mid-19th century, colonial governor Louis Faidherbe led a landmark campaign to modernize Saint-Louis with projects that fostered new architecture, expansive train tracks, and miles of telegraph lines. Some scholars characterize Saint-Louis as a colonial city that embodies the style of creole architecture, and its attendant cosmopolitan urbanism, by the way the city reflects “systems of social control and economic exchange” (Carey 2016) rather than simply mixing African and European influences. The modern infrastructure and multicultural demographics of this city make it a bridge between cultures, just as the land mass connects the ocean and the desert. As N’Diaye grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, before ever setting eyes on Paris, he was already a student of the urban environment. Indeed, many of the pioneering African artists who would engage Modernism in their home countries before experiencing it in the urban centers of Europe were already familiar with the particular ways that historic cities are layered with juxtaposing cultural influences, eclectic styles, and diverse populations. Even this simple acknowledgement corrects pernicious stereotypes regarding these – and later – artists from Africa. They did not come from a village or jungle, and they were not stupefied by the wonders of civilized society upon arrival in Europe.

N’Diaye’s primary education consisted of many sketches for M. Charlasse, in whose class he would win several awards. As a teenager, he worked for Cinema Vox, a popular film house in Saint-Louis, where he painted the movie posters for American, French, and locally-produced films. Given his close relationship with theater management, some of his first projects were bandes dessinées (comic strips) that he drew and projected onto the theater screens by candlelight. To experience this level of creative exercise was certainly unique for a young artist living in one of the French colonies. He completed his formal education in Senegal before winning a scholarship in 1948 that allowed him to move to Montpelier where he studied architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts. With an eye toward city planning and architectural development, N’Diaye was certainly aware of the impact of a city’s physicality on the modern man, even though he never depicted cityscapes in his paintings. The urban environment is implied by the way it impacts his subjects and even how he builds his scenes through masterfully composed, highly-finished
drawings: “For me, drawing is the tool by which all good work acquires its solid base; without these tools, nothing stands” (Kaiser 2002, 14).

Continuing his studies at the École de Beaux-Arts of Paris in 1949, N’Diaye worked in the atelier of George-Henri Pingusson. During this time, Pingusson had just begun his tenure as chief architect for the postwar reconstruction of towns in the Moselle and Lorraine regions. Though N’Diaye may have worked on project drawings in the International Style, he found his most influential teachers after completing his degree in architecture. Spending some time in the atelier of sculptor Robert Coutin, N’Diaye settled on enrollment at the Académie de la Grande Chaumières where he studied with sculptor Ossip Zadkine, who would expose him to traditional African sculpture, and painter Yves Brayer, who passed on an affinity for painting. He would remain at the Académie through 1958, having been chosen as the massier for the painting section. Though N’Diaye ultimately decided on a career in painting over sculpture, he was indebted to Zadkine for establishing his personal sense of rigor. He also recalled the significance of understanding that an artist must be very demanding on himself first of all, before expecting the same of others (Vieyra 1983).

By the time N’Diaye met Ossip Zadkine, the Russian-born artist had relocated from London to Paris, joined the Cubist movement, gained his French citizenship, fought in the war, self-exiled to Manhattan for four years, and won the Venice Biennale grand prize for sculpture in 1950 (Strong 1956). His idiosyncratic style took inspiration from Greek statuary and African sculptures. It was Zadkine who encouraged N’Diaye to visit the museums of France and Europe that housed the spoils of the empire – in particular, the Musée de l’Homme. It was at this point that N’Diaye developed his penchant for sketching, amassing hundreds of drawings in notebooks over the course of his career. In fact, when art critics later read Africanisms in his paintings by way of his sketchbook, he insisted: “As for the formal relationship which may exist between my art and the visual arts of the African continent, I didn’t research them in a systematic manner. I studied African sculpture just as I did Roman and Gothic and European sculpture: by drawing it when I saw it in the museums” (Perspectives 1987, 163). Across N’Diaye’s training and career, it becomes even more evident that he deserves to be remembered first as a painter, and only secondly as an African – a sentiment echoed by a new generation of curators (Enwezor 2008, 46). Though Modernist art frequently looked to the abstracted, geometricized figurative sculpture from West Africa as a source of inspiration, N’Diaye’s home country of Senegal is not known for historic sculptural traditions. Therefore, there was nothing innate or authentic about his journeys to see collections of African art in Europe’s encyclopedic museums. As he studied and sketched, he took ownership of centuries of artwork.
For his studies under Yves Brayer, there is even less association with African elements; instead, we find a gestural painter from Versailles who synthesized international influences in a Nouveau Réalisme aesthetic. He had a particular affinity with the coloration of the Spanish masters – which N’Diaye would share – and traveled throughout the African and European coasts of the Mediterranean, making his way to Iran, Russia, and Japan. Always returning to Paris, Brayer offered an eclectic vision of the world to N’Diaye. Even his practice was expansive, moving seamlessly between oil paintings and more eccentric formats, like murals and tapestry designs. He frequently collaborated with artisans on the design and construction of maquettes, sets, and costumes for the Théâtre Français and various opera houses around the country. Perhaps this influenced N’Diaye’s desire to study stage design upon his return to Paris in the late 1960s after his teaching stint in Dakar (c. 1958–1964); it certainly provided invaluable experience for his major mural and mosaic installations in Dakar at the Daniel Sorano National Theater and the new airport terminal (early 1960s).

Beyond his formal training in France with Zadkine, Brayer, and others, and his informal studies in the various museum collections, N’Diaye was indelibly shaped by the city of Paris itself. As a nexus for many artists from Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the Global South, Paris would influence the content of his paintings and shape the Modernist styles that permeated his oeuvre, even after his return to Senegal in 1958. As soon as he arrived in the ‘City of Light’ in 1949, he frequented the jazz clubs that animated Parisian night life. This music was intimately tied to the identity negotiation of its African-American creators and, therefore, a productive medium through which the Black expatriate population in Paris could consider their own Diasporic qualities. It certainly colored N’Diaye’s conceptions of Blackness and modernity – namely, through the notion of filtration. As cultural production travels into new regions, it is filtered through the lens of whatever new ideo-geographic spaces it encounters. The subjects N’Diaye chose to paint, including a series of jazz singers and musicians, indicate his sensitivity to synthesizing cultural elements that have been displaced and replanted.

I think that everyone is hybrid. Nobody, no matter what civilization, can say that his originality is simply an originality of place. Originality goes beyond original provenance, thanks to the acquisition from and contact with others. There is, therefore, always a mixing. The mixing is a universal part of being human. (Harney 2004, 64–65)
N’Diaye was not lost between cultures. He experienced the sensations of hybridity common to all who are aware of the complex realities that make up the space around them. The artists and mentors who inspired N’Diaye boast their own unique stories of origin, relocation, and adaptation. As Elizabeth Harney argues, N’Diaye’s case urgently asks us to rethink our strategies of labeling and categorizing Modernist artists from the Global South in favor of “polycentric modernities” (Harney 2010, 477). Whatever our new frameworks, they must not characterize him as deviating from an established school or as an aberrant genius, but reflect on “the varied ways of ‘belonging to the modern’ and on the densities and cartographies of modern cultural life” (ibid.). The following section addresses N’Diaye’s move back to Senegal and the reverberations that his personal concept of Modernism had on the young nation’s nascent art scene.

**Ruminations: Paris to Dakar**

Paris would serve once again as a launching pad for artists, writers, and cultural actors when it played host for a conference in 1956. A landmark moment for synthesis and reunion, the First World Congress of Black Writers and Artists brought luminaries of thought together under one roof. At this event, 28-year-old N’Diaye would meet authors Léopold Senghor (future president of Senegal), Aimé Césaire, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, James Baldwin, Manuel dos Santos Lima, and Richard Wright; philosophers Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant; performers Joséphine Baker and Bachir Touré; and fellow artists Gerard Sekoto and Ben Enwonwu, among other pioneering African, Caribbean, and Diaspora Modernists. Organized by Présence Africaine, this group discussed colonialism, emancipation, and a particular conception of valorizing the contributions of Black individuals to universal civilization – a philosophy known as Négritude. It was in this proto-liberation moment that N’Diaye reconnected to Senegal in a tangible way and felt a pull to foster his home country’s transition into independence, even though he was skeptical that Senghor’s vision of Négritude was the best vehicle to accomplish that.

Most published accounts of the dynamic cultural sector in independent Senegal begin with its inaugural president, Léopold Senghor. As a poet, he believed in cultural reclamation and valorization as key tools for building a new identity. He called together artists and thinkers – including Iba N’Diaye, Papa Ibra Tall, and Pierre Lods – to found the major cultural institutions, inviting them to share in his vision for Senegal by establishing a national school for fine art (Ebong 1991, 203; Welling 2015, 93). However, although Senghor had met N’Diaye in Paris, N’Diaye had actually already relocated to Senegal before the end of formal colonial
rule – not after national independence. What compelled him to leave Paris just as he was finding his artistic footing? He returned to Senegal in 1958 in order to set up an independent studio where he could teach night classes to young painters. For over a year, from 6–8 PM, he taught in the café of the very modest Théâtre du Palais (destroyed). Silmon Faye recounts how N’Diaye’s makeshift courses began with four students, though their number grew steadily (Iba N’Diaye 2002, 5). His program would morph into the Maison des Arts du Mali by 1959 and it was absorbed into the larger École des Arts du Senegal in 1961 (renamed Institut National des Arts du Senegal in 1971, and École National des Beaux-Arts du Senegal in 1977). From this independent studio, the celebrated École de Dakar style would spring, its genesis shared with actors beyond Senghor. N’Diaye would only teach at the École des Arts from its foundation in 1961 until 1964 when he became frustrated with Senghor’s discrimination against his program, and secured scholarships to send his best students to France for further tuition (Diouf 1999, 90). Even so, he had already mentored several important figures, including Bocar Pathé Diong and Souleymane Keïta, with a pedagogy derived from his cosmopolitan experiences. His students were versed in art history, learned the formal elements of artmaking, and drew from reality for subject matter. A certain taste was not prescribed and, like N’Diaye, many students took their fine art skills and pushed their themes into the abstract.

Work from this era captures what made N’Diaye so innovative as a Modernist. Even as he actively diversified the Senegalese art scene by mounting his first solo exhibition at the Masion des Arts in 1962, he continued to exhibit abroad, showing work at Paris’ Salon d’Automne in 1962 and the Bienal de São Paulo in 1963 and 1965. A typical style and subject for this period is N’Diaye’s Portrait d’Anna (fig. 1). Though some publications subtitle this work Homage to the artist’s mother, N’Diaye identified the sitter as his niece. His portraits are based on individuals from his world, like family members or models, or are commissions from French expatriates living in Senegal. The act of rendering a person to canvas is, for N’Diaye, an act of poetic translation. Given the rise in photographic and digital technologies, he characterized painting as a humanizing act that forces us to confront the totality of a person. Sensitively building Anna in layers of color, N’Diaye offers us a portrait with equal measures of psychological depth and physical likeness. Alternating between clarity and obscurity, the young woman’s form is wholly intertwined with her surroundings. The luminous blue of her collared dress comes alive against the tassels of red that peek out from her blanket. A dozen tones of brown and taupe show the play of light on her face and arms; these tonal variations are echoed in the cerulean, turquoise, and emerald interplay on the left side of the canvas. As he matured, N’Diaye took great joy in the materiality of his paints, experimenting
with textures and impasto, savoring the application of pigment to canvas, and exploring its physical properties. Another hallmark of Modernism, the artist drew from the local quotidien and asked about his painting’s potential to address the universal. As he created portraits of known individuals, he reflected on society’s dependence on women and themes addressed in Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. From flower vendors at Kermel market, to family in Saint-Louis, Anna is one of dozens of women he depicted as an homage to the African woman.

![Fig. 1. Iba N'Diaye, Portrait d’Anna, 1962, 116 x 80 cm, oil on canvas, private collection (Iba Ndiaye 1977).](image)

A second theme, the goats of the *Tabaski* festival, further distinguishes his practice from that of his contemporaries in Senegal and demonstrates one African’s interpretation and application of Modernism. Like many artists before him, N’Diaye employed seriality to address the insufficiency of a single tableau to capture a figure or scene. He frequently spoke about the balance of conveying physical realities while also communicating his own sense of said objects. Somewhere
between reality and his aspirations for it, *Tabaski: Sacrifice du Mouton* (fig. 2), part of a multi-canvas series revolving around this annual Senegalese ritual, is representative of his oeuvre in both subject matter and execution. *Tabaski* is an annual festival commemorating the Qur’anic story of Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son and Allah’s faithfulness to provide a wild sheep as a substitute; this holiday is more widely known as *Eid al-Adha* (Festival of the Sacrifice). Celebrated widely throughout Islamic West Africa, the festival of *Tabaski* serves as an important reunion for both family and community. In this image, three sheep and one human form vaguely emerge from the gestural, muddied storm of paint. The subject matter becomes ancillary as N’Diaye uses the cultural ritual as a vehicle for his painterly experimentation. Before any considerations of his identity or *Africanité*, N’Diaye claims his role as painter. The *Tabaski* series embodies a persistent engagement with the materiality of his medium – at times thinly washed or encrusted in impasto. While his subject matter might refer to local customs he witnessed in his childhood or during various return trips to Senegal, his manner of handling paint speaks to his immersion in the expressionist styles popular in France. This series led to some of his first critical acclaim, with Judith Meyer of the Musées d’Art et d’Histoire de la Ville de Paris describing the series debut at the 1970 festival in Sarlat as a profound representation of life cycles and collective memory (*Iba N’Diaye* 1977, 12). She notes how the sheep’s gazes implicate the

**Fig. 2.** Iba N’Diaye, *Tabaski: Sacrifice du Mouton*, 1963, 150 x 200 cm, oil on canvas, collection of the Senegalese Embassy in France (*Iba Ndiaye* 1977).
viewer in the eventual égorgement (throat-slitting) and écartèlement (quartering) of these sacrifices, but she also allows for an aesthetic analysis of N'Diaye's impeccable draftsmanship against the unrestrained brushstrokes. As the series best remembered by art history, the Tabaski paintings are often afforded an aesthetic interpretation that proved elusive to many African Modernists. Questions of authenticity, multiculturalism, and Africanisms dominated scholarship throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. For example, see how he is characterized in Africa Explores: “Citizen of two worlds, N'Diaye does not hesitate to treat an ostensibly Islamic subject, though he himself is not Muslim [...]” (Vogel 1991, 184). However, as early as 1970, N’Diaye lamented the undue pressure of reflecting Africanisms when his primary concern was painterly.

I’m not interested in meeting popular taste. I refuse to give in to the folklorism that certain Europeans, hungry for exoticism, expect from me; otherwise, I would have to live according to the ideas that they hold for a contemporary African Artist, a segregated idea, which tends to confine the African Artist to the realm of naïve, bizarre, surrealist, and outlandish art. Painting, for me, is first and foremost a necessity of my inmost self, a need to express myself as clearly as possible where it concerns my intentions, subjects that have captured me, or to take a stance on vital issues and existential problems. (Iba N’Diaye 1977, 14)

The uniqueness of his practice becomes starker in work produced only two years later. Torn Sheep (Senegaru 1982, pl. 49) reprises the subject matter of Tabaski: Sacrifice du Mouton but takes an even more fragmentary approach to depicting the mammalian form. The legs are splayed in an almost impossible arrangement, a contorted pose that conveys the physical act and psychological repercussions of slaughtering an animal. The artist’s frenzied paintbrush creates a shallow plane of overlapping marks that cover the canvas. With no spatial references, the lifeless sheep anchors the composition. The viewer is positioned above the corpse, gazing at the splayed form from an aerial viewpoint. The low value areas surrounding the body – itself strongly delineated by dark outlines – could then be read as the natural diffusion of blood onto the ground below. His raw imagery and manipulation of space have countless echoes with contemporaries in Europe, notably the work of Francis Bacon – a fellow artist profoundly inspired by Velázquez.

Based on Portrait d’Anna and the Tabaski paintings, it is clear that N’Diaye responded to modernity with his idiosyncratic mixing of source material, stylistic influences, and intellectual preoccupations. Neither an African who “also became
profundely Parisian” (Diouf 1999, 93) nor an artist whose exceptionalism and authenticity made his paintings “truly African and done with great talent” (Doum 1966), N’Diaye is an artist whose life and work between Paris and Dakar exemplifies the circulatory, amorphous transnationality that typifies mid-century Modernism. Given N’Diaye’s unwillingness to subscribe to rigid boundaries and identities, it comes as no surprise that his ideological clashes with President Senghor led to an untenable situation.

While the pupils in N’Diaye’s division of Research of Fine Art practiced formal techniques, drew from live models, and studied art history, students in the other division, the Research of Black Fine Art, were sequestered from external influences that might hinder their supposed innate vision. Tall and Lods’ protégés were given materials and expected to create freely; these students would not be stifled by a classical education and an art system that privileged a Western methodology. Tension rose at the École des Arts over the role of art history in a student’s development. N’Diaye argued that newly liberated African artists should be familiar with the contributions of traditional African art, as Senghor so championed, but that the new generation should also aspire to surpass them. “The artists of new Africa will assist their compatriots in leaving the cultural ‘ghetto’ where certain others would like to – more or less consciously – trap them.” (Sylla 2009) This was a clear pushback against Senghor’s Négritude that translated into essentialized, decorative tropes of Africa when expressed through the laissez-faire pedagogy from Tall and Lods’ section of the École. This ideological divide could also be read as a microcosm of larger debates over the direction of African art in the modern era, from content and style, to its intended audience. Does it speak to the local realities or global dynamics? Is it an expression of the individual or the universal? Should it respond to the postcolonial moment or a timeless sense of Africanité?

Far from the celebratory tone of Senghor’s Négritude and Tall’s cosmic tapestries, N’Diaye questioned the value of flattening the Black experience. He chose to instead pursue a Modernist affinity for materiality and process, and an ever-evolving rapport between tension and synthesis in his cultural influences. Ultimately, N’Diaye left the École as Senghor’s government favored works created by Tall, Lods, and their students, as evidenced by the trends in patronage and collecting. To his students in Dakar, N’Diaye issued a warning that should resonate with any young African artist negotiating modernity: “Watch out for those who would urge you to be an African before a painter or sculptor, those who still want to corner us within an exotic garden, all under the name of some undefined authenticity.” (Diouf 1999, 91)
Fatigue: From Dakar to Paris

“I need to go back to Paris often […] If I remained [in Dakar] I would run the risk of falling asleep. But, for inspiration, I need Africa.” (Mount 1973, 167)

Historians contest exactly when N’Diaye left Dakar after resigning from his post at the school; some cite that he stayed in this post until 1967; others say that he spent three years in Dakar working on other projects after resigning in 1964; still others state that he left in 1964 to travel through Nigeria, but that he continually returned to Dakar for research projects throughout the late 1970s. We know that he was in Dakar for the planning of Tendances et confrontations, an exhibition of modern/contemporary art from Africa and its Diaspora that was organized as part of the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Art (or, FESMAN). Though the festival had been in development since 1962, N’Diaye was only handed the reins of curating this exhibition in 1965. Perhaps even the ambiguity of his departure could be read as a sign of the ‘both/and’ nature of his life and oeuvre.

By 1967, N’Diaye and his wife Francine relocated to Paris, where she took up a curatorial post at the Musée de l’Homme and he affiliated with Le Groupe de la Ruche. Since the couple had met in Paris and married in 1953, it was a fitting return to be immersed in not only that museum’s collection of African objects, but also the field of museums more broadly. In a 1980 interview for P.S. Vieyra’s documentary, N’Diaye’s studio in Paris is decorated with posters, one of which advertised African Terra Cottas South of the Sahara (Detroit Institute of Arts, 1979), demonstrating how au courant he remained. N’Diaye’s work of the 1970s and 1980s shows a deeper interest in abstraction as manifested in his landscapes, portraits, and mangled sheep, as well as certain paintings which have become iconic in defining his practice.

Juan de Pareja menacé par des chiens (Juan de Pareja Menaced by Dogs) (fig. 3) was painted between 1985 and 1986. This painting serves as a fitting conclusion to N’Diaye’s Modernist engagement for the ways in which it returns to his affinity for the Spanish Masters and demonstrates a hyper self-awareness within the lineage of painting history. On the heels of his first exhibition in New York (1981), curated by Lowery Stokes Sims of the Metropolitan Museum, N’Diaye would finally have the opportunity to see Diego Velázquez’s portrait of his African-descended slave, Juan de Pareja (fig. 4). Acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1971, this painting left the private sphere and entered the public imagination as a rare example of an Old Master painting with a named, known person of color as the subject.
Fig. 3. Iba N’Diaye, *Juan de Pareja menacé par des chiens* (*Juan de Pareja Menaced by Dogs*), 1985–1986, 163 x 130 cm, oil on canvas, location unknown (Iba N’Diaye: L’Œuvre de Modernité 2008).

Fig. 4. Diego Velázquez, *Juan de Pareja*, 1650, 32 x 27.5 inches, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
Just as he denied the ideological pressure to champion the rhythms of a Négritude-centric art, N’Diaye avoided compliance with European expectations of what an African should depict in style and subject matter. Actively grappling with the history of art, the strong line from Velázquez and Goya underpinned his paintings. In his reprise of Velázquez’s portrait of Juan, N’Diaye makes an incisive commentary on a vision of art history where the art world is too keen to celebrate Velázquez for his pioneering, brave inclusivity. In depicting this colored man from another class according to the social mores of a gentleman, is the artist not transgressing an oppressive system and generously elevating the visual status of this slave? And yet, with N’Diaye’s interpretation of the scene, the dynamics are visibly more fraught than Velázquez lets on. N’Diaye postulates that if the viewer were to pull away from the refined, serene subject, the larger context would reveal the menace lurking just outside the frame. Fanged beasts with bloodshot eyes make the scene claustrophobic; Juan is pressed down into the bottom left corner of the canvas. Every formal element that Velázquez employs to polish the portrait of Juan – the delicately textured lace on his collar, the cool greens that harmonize his garb with the background, the confident gaze of subject to viewer – is undermined by N’Diaye. N’Diaye’s harried brushstrokes obscure the historical figure of Juan, the violence of the gesture evoking the violence that is masked by Velázquez’s painstaking finish. He inverts the color palette with hellish oranges that emote an anxiety on the part of the sitter, whose gaze is pointedly averted from ours. As a painter, N’Diaye embraces the constructed, mediated nature of image-making. As a slave, what agency did Juan have in sitting for this portrait? Is fidelity to the subject’s physicality truthful enough to capture that person in portraiture? N’Diaye pushes back on the canon of art and the assumptions that modern viewers bring to it. More than just an aesthetic or technical exercise, his paintings could be wielded: “Painting is not an art of leisure; it’s a method of combat, a way to express my understanding of the world.” (Vieyra 1983)

This is an artist well-read in art history, salient in discourses of power, and devoted to the medium of painting.

When asked if he felt cut off from Africa since relocating to Europe, the artist reflected on the role of memory as a mediator that ultimately leads to a truer representation:

[…] every time I’m back [in Senegal], I stock up on notes, as many as possible, so that even when I withdraw from that space, I am able to find things that are true. Even the act of withdrawing implies the process of memorizing, and re-memorizing, from a particular point of view. It permits me to more freely interpret, both the subject and my vision of it. (ibid.)
Over the last decades of his life, N’Diaye exhibited in almost every region of France and mounted retrospectives in Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands. In January 2000 and May 2008, major exhibitions were organized in Saint-Louis and Dakar, respectively, to honor his career and legacy. In 2013, his estate gave 154 works to the patrimoine of Senegal, with other paintings integrated into collections in Paris, Atlanta, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere – all nodes within his complex network of influence.

Reflections: From Paris to Dakar

I briefly want to return to N’Diaye's curatorial role for FESMAN in 1966. As previously mentioned, the artist was tasked with organizing the 600 works of art submitted for Tendances et confrontations, the first exhibition of modern/contemporary African art at such a scale. In this role, N’Diaye was an interlocutor between nations, just as this exhibition negotiated the shift from traditional art – as seen in the nearby companion exhibition, L’art nègre – to modern African art. Though Senghor envisioned a continuity between the past and the present, N’Diaye's discontent with the principles of Négritude guided him to curate as an artist and intellectual for artists and intellectuals. By making the space open for dialogues between the artists, N’Diaye moved away from the nationalist regimentation seen in the festival’s call for participants. Based on his experiences in Paris, he would have been savvy about the transnational exchanges happening with contemporary artists who created in modes beyond reductive national identities.

For example, N’Diaye would have met Armenian-Ethiopian painter Skunder Boghossian at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière when they overlapped in 1957. Before creating his masterwork, Night Flight of Dread and Delight, in Paris in 1964, he had already studied with Canadian painter Jacques Godbout and at Slade in London. At that school, Boghossian overlapped with Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi and later met Afro-Cuban-Chinese artist Wifredo Lam in Paris. N’Diaye also met Paris-based South African artist Gerard Sekoto at the 1956 Congress. Ernest Mancoba, another painter from South Africa, who participated in CoBrA, recalled how Sekoto kept close tabs on both the English and French circles of African artists and intellectuals in Paris during the 1950s (Obrist 2003, 17). Sekoto has long been recognized as a Modernist forerunner and celebrated for his emotive scenes of quotidian life under Apartheid and in mid-century Paris after his self-exile in 1947. After a brief stay with Nigerian painter Ben Enwonwu – whom N’Diaye also met at the 1956 Congress – Sekoto found work as a music composer and used his free time to paint lively scenes of his new home city. Paired
with other Parisian encounters, N’Diaye benefitted from the cross-fertilization of African voices that sought new modes of expression.

And so these Diasporic artists that N’Diaye encountered in Paris found themselves together in Dakar in 1966 for this grand festival. As I have argued elsewhere, this exhibition was a collective redefinition as “individual thinkers and makers capitalized on the fluidity of definitions to carve a space for themselves in Modernist discourse” (Underwood 2019, 60). These artists rarely fit into the exclusionist and imperialist circles of European capitals; at the same time, reductive identity politics told them they were too tainted or Europeanized to be reintegrated into their native countries. Their journeys were wholly individualistic and yet notably resonant. To have N’Diaye’s work in dialogue with other artists from Africa – artists who shared his Modernist training in equal part with his lived Diasporic realities in Europe – and to have this rendezvous in Dakar is a potent metaphor of the entangled nature of transnational art practice. While Paris as a city served as an important crossroads of influences, the city itself was not the determining factor in shaping African visions of Modernism. The credit belongs wholly to the artists who made this city just one of many junctions on their multi-sited stories.

**Conclusion**

Paris of the mid-century was a hub for such exchanges as artists from North and South collided in the ateliers, museums, and cafes of the city. Some scholars recognize “a focused internationalist dialogue in its art world” (Wilson 2016, 348) mentioning Zao-Wou Ki (China), Avigdor Arikha (Israel), Charles Houssein Zenderoudi (Iran), and Barbara Chase-Riboud (United States) in the same breath as Iba N’Diaye, Gerard Sekoto, and Ernest Mancoba.

In an era when many former colonies underwent rigorous nation-building and established nationalist art movements, N’Diaye was exceptional for his ability to maintain an individual aesthetic that foregrounded painterly abstraction even as he moved between Senegal and France. Far from a copyist who mimed the Modernist trends in Paris, N’Diaye was a participant in the movement as a student and young professional. He maintained his participation, even from Dakar. Whether or not he was recognized by critics and peers does not (in)validate his participation in the movement. In this regard, his practice could be read as an alternative not only to Senghorian conceptions of a modern artist, but also to the Eurocentric circuits of Modernism in the 1950s. Though critics prefer characterizations with succinct, bifurcating labels – like “African artworks […] incorporating School of Paris painterliness” (McEvilley 1991, 270) or “the most European-oriented
in the new African art movement” (Mount 1973, 167) – N’Diaye’s practice was marked by multiple influences that were masterfully synthesized. Beyond his own practice, as a curator for FESMAN, he also facilitated an important gathering for two generations of African artists. His generation had already begun transnational careers as Modernists living between Africa and Europe, but the generation who was coming of age would navigate the newly-established African schools of art and chart even more daring courses between the continent and new arrival cities.

Notes
1 Author’s translation. Original French: “Le dessin pour moi est la base de tout travail, le moyen d’acquerir les outils sans lesquels rien ne tient.”
2 The concept of a massier is unique to French schools. The massier is a student responsible for collecting dues from others in the atelier and monitoring the supplies shared in common.
3 Original French: “C’est d’être exigeant d’abord avec moi-même pour attendre des autres la même exigence.”
4 Author’s translation. Original French: “[…]les artistes de l’Afrique nouvelle aideront leurs compatriotes à sortir du ‘ghetto’ culturel dans lequel certains voudraient plus ou moins consciemment les enfermer.”
5 Author’s translation. Original French: “Prenez garde à ceux qui exigent de vous d’être Africains avant d’être peintre ou sculpteur, à ceux qui, au nom d’une authenticité qui reste à définir, continuent à vouloir nous conserver dans un jardin exotique.”
6 Original French: “J’ai besoin d’y retourner [to Paris] souvent. Ne serait-ce que pour prendre un bain de théâtre, de cinémas; pour me replonger dans un climat. Au point de vue technique, l’école de Paris est très importante; elle offre à l’artiste une confrontation avec des peintres de tous les coins du monde. Si je restais ici, je risquerais me m’endormir. Mais, pour l’inspiration, j’ai besoin de l’Afrique.”
7 Author’s translation. Original French: “Elle n’est pas un art de loisirs mais un moyen de combat, une façon d’exprimer ma conception du monde.”

References


