Salah M. Hassan

African Modernism: Beyond Alternative Modernities Discourse

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

African Modernism and Art History's Exclusionary Narrative

On October 25, 2002, South African artist Ernest Mancoba, a pillar of modern African art, passed away in a hospital in Clamart, a suburb of Paris. He was ninety-eight. With a life that spanned most of the twentieth century, Mancoba had lived through the high periods of modernism and postmodernism. A few months before Mancoba's passing, I was extremely fortunate to have received an extended interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, submitted for publication to *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, which I edit. The interview was eventually published in 2003 and was indeed one of the most inspiring texts that I have read in years.[1]

However, why should Mancoba's life and his artistic accomplishments be instructive in exploring African modernity and modernism? To be sure, it is not the mere coincidence of his thinking about European modernism or the significance of Europe, where Mancoba lived and worked for more than fifty years. Mancoba is memorable for his remarkable life of creativity, for his intellectual vigor, for his unique and pro-

South Atlantic Quarterly 109:3, Summer 2010
DOI 10.1215/00382876-2010-001 © 2010 Duke University Press

found body of work, and for his innovative visual vocabulary and style that have come to shape an important part of our understanding of African modernism in the visual arts. As with other pioneers of African visual modernism, such as Skunder Boghossian, Dumile Feni, Gerard Sokoto, Ibrahim El Salahi, and Malangatana Ngwenya, Mancoba had his share of a life charted in exile. In Mancoba's case, the apartheid system forced him into exile. Starting in the late 1930s, he moved first to Paris and then led an itinerant life in other European cities. In Europe, he was interned by the Nazis and then barred from returning home by the end of World War II due to the rise of apartheid in South Africa. Indeed, he was part of a generation of artists comparable to the generation of African literary figures that includes Wole Soyinka, Naguib Mahfouz, Chinua Achebe, and El Tayeb Salih. Most significant and more relevant here is the fact that Mancoba was a founding member of a major modernist art collective, the CoBrA group, and was married to Danish artist Sonja Ferlov, also an important CoBrA member.[2] A committed intellectual, he was indeed among those revolutionary figures who exerted a powerful influence on younger African artists looking for new tropes of self-representation and self-expression.

However, as is the case generally with non-Western artists based in the West, Mancoba's achievements have not received the critical recognition they deserve, and they have remained sidelined in art historical texts on twentieth-century art. As we well know, the dominant history of Western modernism leaves out the massive infusions of non-Western artists and cultures into the metropolitan heartland throughout the twentieth century. Such an omission renders invisible the important influences these artists have exerted on Western modernist art practice and on the very fabric of the societies they adopted as their new homes.[3] In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said notes that an exploration of the twentieth-century history and sociology of the Western metropolis reveals the strong presence of students, writers, and artists from previously colonized territories, including Africa, and in Paris, London, Rome, and other European capitals. Their intellectual production is essential to any reconsideration of what constitutes global modernity as it overlaps with that of their contemporary European counterparts, and their intellectual and cultural production can in no way be analyzed as merely reactive assertions of separate native or colonized subjectivity.[4] This condition of historical affairs provides the following questions: What do we understand by African modernism, and what is "African" in African modernity and modernism? Furthermore, how does

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

African modernity operate in global contexts, and how it could be defined or theorized?

What Is Africa?

Elusive as it may be, Africa is a complex intellectual construct whose significations differ from audience to audience. The "idea of Africa," as V. Y. Mudimbe has argued, is partly an invention and partly the affirmation of certain natural features, cultural characteristics, and values that contribute to Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a set of differences from those, say, designated by Asia and Europe.[5] But Africa is also a diverse and highly complex historical entity. For the last four centuries and due to experiences of slavery, colonialism, and the resultant mass displacement and diasporization of African peoples and cultures, it is no longer possible to speak of Africa as a mere geographic entity or a delimited locale. In this context, "Africa" and African modernism are products of this historically complex entity and global presence. "African" as a concept may signal commonality, in the sense of a shared historical experience, but it is by no means a product of cultural similarities. Such an understanding is crucial to a deeper and more nuanced approach to the analysis and investigation of African modernist practices and Africa's place within the discourse of modernity.

In tracing the idea of Africa, therefore, one has to think about several trajectories that produced or contributed to the invention of Africa as an intellectual construct riddled with artificial divides and paradoxical misrepresentations. First, one should be aware of *colonial primitivist* and *Orientalist trajectories* that have contributed to the production of a racialized hierarchy of African people and their cultures, rooted in Darwinian and evolutionary thinking predominant in the European academy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such trajectories resulted in an elaborate scheme of dichotomies and hierarchies that continue to influence scholarship on Africa and African studies. Second, one should understand that *continental trajectories*, which were extensively shaped by the colonial experience at times, in turn created parallel internalized divisions as well as moments of solidarity and even internationalist links and overlaps. The solidarity between North and so-called sub-Saharan Africans in the context of the independence and liberation movements, exemplified by the strong political alliance between Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Kwame

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

Nkrumah of Ghana in the 1960s, was one such moment of overlap. Third, one must realize the importance of *diasporic trajectories*, which includes a diverse range of intellectual and political movements, from pan-Africanism to Afrocentrism, and which often produces contradictory and paradoxical positions. Pan-Africanism, largely a political movement, has produced a vision of Africa that is often global and transcendental in its overview and is most often concerned with the geographical entity referred to as sub-Saharan Africa.[6] It has produced a more inclusive narrative of the African past (e.g., the redemption of ancient Egypt as part of larger Africa) but has little concern for contemporary issues or subtleties. Nevertheless, pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism contribute to the analysis of the idea of Africa and its historical and contemporary manifestations.

What Is African Modernism?

From the outset, two general points must be emphasized in relation to modernity and modernism: the plurality of modernity, even in its European context, and the realization that there are other modernisms beyond the European context. Even at the core of the history of art from the period referred to as modern in Europe there are disagreements about its boundaries, its validity, and its meanings. As Paul Wood argues in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, we cannot easily define modernism. What we can do, he suggests, is to "look at some ways in which the concept has been used and try to draw out some of the central preoccupations of the modernists."[7] In Europe, modernism signaled a particular attitude toward the present and a conscious departure from the past. *Modernity*, as defined by many scholars today, engages those social changes implied in becoming modern—urbanization, industrialization, wage labor and factory systems, and so on—while *modernism* designates artistic practices associated with modernity. One point to remember is that modern art practice, whether in European or other contexts, also signals a sense of continual difference, a self-conscious process of refashioning the self and the projection of particular attitudes toward the past and the present. This makes it difficult to secure a stable definition of modernity, as it is by nature fluid and constantly subject to renewal. Hence, the claim to modernity, as suggested by Rasheed Araeen, is better understood as being open and not necessarily limited to a universalized European construct or monopoly.[8]

Although the "early modern" has been located as far back as the sixteenth

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

century, for the purposes of the visual arts, modernity has been understood as a major transformative social force starting in the mid-nineteenth century. The ideas of Charles Baudelaire on transient beauty, shock, and the fleeting and ephemeral experiences of urban life have become widely influential, especially through their interpretation by Walter Benjamin. Karl Marx emphasizes the centrality of capitalist exchange and commodification of increasing domains of life as a key feature of modernity. Max Weber has suggested that social life under modernity is characterized by bureaucratization, rationalization, a disenchantment with the world, and secularization.[9]

For its part, *modernism* specifically refers to the aesthetic, artistic, and representational practices associated with *modernity*. There is a narrower, privileged sense of modernism, however, which is used more often and refers to the great period of European and American artistic experimentation between approximately 1880 and 1940. During this period, specific artistic movements followed in quick succession, were characterized with ever-greater self-reflexivity with regard to the medium (e.g., painting should be paint on a flat surface rather than a representational window to the outside world), and increasing autonomy from other mediums (e.g., photography should not emulate painting but needs to find its own aesthetic possibilities and so on).[10] But not all art produced under modernity is modernist; *modernist* is sometimes reserved for the most advanced or avant-garde art of its time. For example, realist painting is seen as backward (and thus not modernist) in comparison with postimpressionism during late-nineteenth-century Europe.[11] An essential concept to modernist practice, *avant-garde* comes from a military term referencing the frontline troops on a battlefield. Transposed into the arts, the term continues to designate the most adventurous and experimental forms of art practice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The avant-garde can be seen to coincide with modernism, but it also bears a sense of an art that seeks to reference social concerns rather that remaining autonomous. Its use (sometimes as the neo-avant-garde) is continued for post–World War II movements as well, such as conceptualism during the 1960s.[12] Inevitably, the characterization of the avant-garde excludes the majority of work produced during any specific period.[13]

The exclusionary mechanisms built into the definitions of these terms have attracted a number of important critiques, both from within Europe itself and from non-Western perspectives. The lack of strict correspondence

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

between social modernity and artistic modernism and the alienated quality of the latter provide this space for critique. The deployment of the word *modernism* may be seen as an ideological operation that prevents other understandings of modern life, through realist and narrative modes, for example, which were excluded by emphasis on the experimental and alienated modernist avant-gardes.[14]

Postcolonial theory offers powerful critiques of these terms as well, especially *modernity*, by showing how the very terms of the debate are necessarily Eurocentric. While modernities are better seen as irreducibly plural and fully global, standard theorizations of modernity and modernism, emphasizing Western social transformations and artistic experiments, designate social developments and artistic expressions of other regions as necessarily belated and secondary to the Western modern. Gwendolyn Wright has argued that Western hegemony and the ideological force of imperialism have obscured the fact that

> "Western" modernism came into being in a world framed by colonialism, where visions for improvement and innovation overlapped with and often caused brutal destruction. In the colonial world as elsewhere, modernism was, and remains, at once a universal ambition, a transnational operation, and myriad local variations. Likewise, resistance to these forces has long been an integral part of modern life, whether in the form of nostalgia for the past or, as we realized so brutally on September 11, 2001, that of violent opposition.[15]

In the same vein, Western hegemony has made us forget that Western modernism and the unfolding of its history, from the Renaissance to the present, stands on the shoulders of other cultures and civilizations. Among other scholars, Edward Said observes that European modernism itself has "many parents": "Most histories of European aesthetic modernism leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland during the early years of this century, despite the patently important influence they had on modernist artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Matisse, and on the very fabric of a society that largely believed itself to be homogenously white and Western."[16] Said further notes that it has taken a long time and a remarkable adjustment in perspective and understanding "to take account of the contribution to modernism of decolonization resistance culture, and the literature of opposition to imperialism."[17]

What Michel Foucault in another context calls "subjugated knowledges"

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

has exploded in the form of literature and scholarship by postcolonial intellectuals who challenge the canons of domains controlled by a "Western Judeo-Christian" tradition.[18] In this regard, an analysis of any key Western metropolis such as Paris or London provides numerous examples of how African and Caribbean immigrant writers, poets, and artists have laid claim to the space of the Western metropolis and reworked ideas of exile, nation, and citizenship in ways that defy any easy readings of "Otherness." Key examples, of course, include *Présence Africaine* and the Pan-African Congress in Paris (1954) and in Rome (1956). Leslie Adelson, in her work on Turkish German literature, provides an astute analysis of immigrant literary production in the context of contemporary German culture. She has underlined the increased epistemological uncertainty with which one must regard the contribution of Turkish immigrant writers to German literature. Rather than locating their production in a space of "in between-ness," as has been the norm in German circles of literary criticism, Adelson argues for a new understanding of contemporary German culture and cultural labor, and a serious rethinking of its spatial configuration.[19]

Furthermore, the problem of writing a history of modernity is compounded by the sense of the non-West providing a timeless, ahistorical backdrop against which temporal modernity is played out. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the disciplinary practice of writing history unwittingly produces a singular, universal history, a history formatted according to the template provided by the history of the West: "Insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, 'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variants on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe.'"[20] In this sense, the standard ideas of modernity privilege modernity as the West but simultaneously are also posited as universal. As a result, Timothy Mitchell suggests, "the non-West must play the role of the outside, the otherness that creates the boundary of the space of modernity."[21] However, the claim that parallel or separate modernities were enacted in other sites—for example, a separate African modernity—does not alleviate the problem. This is because emphasizing the *spatiality* of the particular geographic space leads to a suspension of its temporal character. As Naoki Sakai rightly points out, the characterization of a geographically particularized modernity will necessarily empty it of

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

temporality, effectively rendering it as nonmodern.[22] If so, how are the phenomena of non-Western modernities possible at all?

A number of scholars have suggested that modernity reinscribes itself outside the metropole through a translation, which performatively incorporates *difference*.[23] Modernity is seen here as a repetitive and transformative sequence of events, which find echoes across the world. For example, Mitchell argues that we attend to the modern not simply as a series of singular events, but to its *staging* by repetition: "Modernity, like capitalism, is defined by its claim to universality, to uniqueness . . . Yet this always remains an impossible unity, an incomplete universal. Each staging of the modern must be arranged to produce the unified, global history of modernity, yet each requires those forms of difference that introduce the possibility of a discrepancy . . . Modernity then becomes the unsuitable yet unavoidable name for all these discrepant histories."[24] In this view, modernity of the margin, through repetitions produced by successive acts of translation, attempts to stabilize the idea of the modern, yet simultaneously undermines it by constantly demonstrating its necessary contingency.

Stuart Hall provides a contrasting and possibly more hopeful view. Hall wants us to abandon the binary of a center-periphery model altogether. Despite profound inequalities and the absolute hegemonic and centralizing primacy of Western modernity and capitalism, artistic practice is not being homogenized. As he points out:

> The world is moving outwards and can no longer be structured in terms of the centre/periphery relation. It has to be defined in terms of a set of interesting centres, which are both different from and related to one another. If you think about where important movements are being made, sometimes they happen in the centre, but the most exciting artists are those who live simultaneously in the centre and at the periphery. We are embarking on a hundred different ideas of "the modern," not one, and therefore, of a thousand practicing modern artists.[25]

Toward a Critical Definition of African Modernism

The interventions of Said, Chakrabarty, Mitchell, Sakai, and Hall, among others, are helpful in their efforts to define and theorize African modernity and to reposition African modernism vis-à-vis the discourse of global modernism. Yet, such interventions also provide a glimpse of the difficulties of

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

theorizing modernity and modernism outside the West, considering the long history of exclusion and the entrenched stronghold of Eurocentrism on this discourse. At this juncture, it would be useful to articulate a set of characteristics associated with the origin and development of African modernism, which could help us in the effort to define it as a movement and intellectual construct.

By European standards, the period we designate as modern in Africa is certainly short, and modernism in African terms is certainly much more recent—as implied by the title of Okwui Enwezor's exhibition and book *The Short Century* and as indicated by the period of Enwezor's focus in the exhibition, 1945 until 1994.[26] However, modernism is also inconsistent as a phenomenon within the African continent. In places such as Egypt and other parts of North Africa, it is possible to trace instances of modernism in many aspects of art and society to as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, a new generation of Egyptian artists, driven by the fervor of the nationalist and anticolonial movements led by nationalist leaders such as Saad Zaghloul, turned to ancient Egyptian art and architecture in their search for a new visual vocabulary to express their urge for a modernist and secular vision to foreground the nation as a modern project. This led to the rise of the neo-pharaonic style in painting and sculpture, which combined references to ancient Egyptian art with contemporary popular and peasant cultures. This was coupled with the rise of a strong tradition of art education, which started in the late nineteenth century and greatly influenced generations of Egyptian and Arab artists. In Egypt, the modernist paintings of Mahmoud Said and the monumental sculpture of Mahmoud Mokhtar—in addition to major movements such as the Egyptian surrealists, who formed an extension to the Paris-based surrealists, and others who experimented with European movements such as abstraction, Dadaism, and cubism—point to an early beginning and serious engagement with the tenets of modernism as they were being formulated in their European grounds, without temporal lag.[27]

African modernism is also marked by certain experiences considered integral to the African experience for the last four centuries, such as slavery, colonialism, and the violent rupture colonialism created with tradition. In that sense, the conscious claim to modernity implies a sense of resistance, for modernity in Africa was born out of the struggle for decolonization. Again, as *The Short Century* seeks to recapture, the visual arts and decolonization in general constitute an intelligent juxtaposition and a

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

defining phase of modernism in Africa. Integral to this moment is the rise of national consciousness and the project of nation building.

It is in this context that one should critically approach the combined roles played by European and Western patronage and intervention, European expatriates, colonial administrators, liberal colonial educators, and missionaries whose various reasons and motivations have contributed to the rise of the modern art movement in Africa.[28] In spite of the utilitarian goals and largely vocational ethos of the colonial educational system in many former African countries, formal art schools and art academies were also established, often fashioned on the Western art educational model, in the 1940s or shortly before. Again, the rise of art education is also uneven historically, especially in the case of Egypt and North Africa, due to their proximity to Europe or in a European settler colonialist society such as South Africa.

The most important factor in the rise of African modernism has been the nationalistic cultural resurgence that swept through many newly independent African countries and where government patronage and interest in the arts became part of decolonization, the nation-building project, and refashioning of the self in modern terms. As several exhibitions and their companion catalogs such as *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* and *The Short Century* have clearly documented, the result has been the creation of new movements in all facets of the arts and in social life, in an attempt to construct new tropes of self-representation.[29] In that sense, one could argue that African modernism is clearly nationalistic. However, considering the nature of the political ideologies, programs, and strategies adopted by leaders and movements of independence and liberation in Africa, mostly on the Left and socialist in their leaning, it was equally also internationalist in its orientation.

Furthermore, one must emphasize that the African modernist experience is by definition transnational and a product of a global experience. Paul Gilroy's conceptions of the "black Atlantic" as transnational and as a countercurrent to Western modernity is perhaps most helpful in understanding the global nature of African intellectual production and its centrality in rethinking not only the idea of Africa but the idea of modernity as well. His evocations of the "sailing ship" motif and of the triangular nature of the black Atlantic allow for a more nuanced approach to the idea of Africa.[30] Négritude and pan-Africanism, both as a whole and by their specific individual contributions, are crucial both to the development of

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

African modernism and the ideology of "return" and to these movements' roles in shaping the intellectual and artistic production of artists of African descent in Africa and its diaspora.

The entanglement of the African experience with the West and the Arab world—and with the international black public sphere and the black existential experience of modernity—is thus crucial to our understanding of modernism in the artistic and cultural arenas.[31] As Robin D. G. Kelley succinctly argues, "The making of the African diaspora was as much the product of 'the West' as it was of internal developments in Africa and the Americas. At the same time, racial capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism—the key forces responsible for creating the modern African diaspora—could not shape African culture(s) without altering Western culture."[32] Simultaneously, interesting explorations of new frontiers of the African diaspora have been undertaken by a new generation of scholars, resulting in a much deeper global conception of the African diaspora and its implications for world history and culture. These new frontiers include less-explored aspects of the African diaspora in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, such as Cuba and Puerto Rico, in Latin America (including Mexico and Brazil), in addition to the black British experience, and they include recent African migrations and the new diaspora in Europe. Bringing these important new explorations and perspectives to bear on our analysis of new African migrations is critical for examining the layers of significance of the sociocultural and political processes through which these new diasporic communities, heretofore ignored, have been formed. The new African migratory flows have added new dimensions to earlier African diasporas created by slavery, European colonialism, and the emergence of postcolonial nations in the mid-twentieth century, in which migratory linkages between the colonial metropolis and former colonies continued after decolonization (e.g., Senegalese, Algerians, and other citizens of North African descent in France).

As amply documented in the existing literature in fields other than the visual arts, African modernism has been forged in the intersections of pan-Africanism and pan-Arabism, in the struggle for liberation and decolonization, and in the intellectual aspiration this struggle has come to symbolize in the relationships among Africa, the West, and the world. The Algerian War, the antiapartheid movement, and the Palestinian struggle for self-determination—all closely scrutinized in the existing literature and documented through photography and film—signify the most visible phases of these intersections. These developments certainly ought to play a part in

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

reconfiguring our understanding of Africa and of African modernism as much more global and historically complex than previously understood.

Having outlined some general characteristics of African modernism, it is imperative to show how this experience has been enacted in scholarship and art, and/or represented in contemporary curatorial practice in the visual arena. Several exhibitions and a few texts produced during the last decade have captured aspects of the complexity of African modernity through interdisciplinary approaches. These include, among many, exhibitions such as Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, the Short Century, Authentic/Ex-Centric, Looking Both Ways: A Fiction of Authenticity, and Africa Remix.[33] These exhibitions have provided critical frameworks for interrogating aspects of African modernism and contemporaneity by engaging diverse media, including art, fabrics, posters, photography, architecture, music, theater, fashion, film, and literature. Unlike earlier exhibitions or texts on African modern art, these exhibitions have crossed traditional boundaries in the visual arts by including high and popular cultures and the visual and discursive aspects of art practice, and by challenging the institutional separation of art, architecture, film, video, and new media that we have witnessed in the academy and in usual exhibitions in art museums.

Above all, it is important to mention that these exhibitions have directly or indirectly transcended stereotypical representations of Africa prevalent in the discipline of African and African diaspora art history and visual culture. They challenged the artificial boundaries between North and sub-Saharan Africa, the so-called Arab Africa and black Africa, and stood in clear contrast to essentializing tendencies still prevalent in the field of African art and its scholarship. The general state of research on contemporary and modern African art has improved a great deal in the last two decades, and a number of well-researched books, dissertations, and exhibitions and companion catalogs have been produced. Contemporary African artists in the international arena have started to enjoy recognition, although it remains limited and relatively less than that accorded to their Western counterparts.

Yet, so far, few monographs and exhibitions have focused on documenting African artists of the caliber of Mancoba, El Salahi, Boghossian, Sokoto, Ben Enwonwu, and Uzo Egonu or have taken a detailed critical look at their careers and art.[34] Most Western museums with interest in African art have shied away from retrospective exhibitions dedicated to the work of even a single pioneer modern African artist. The preference so far has been for thematic and group exhibitions, in which it is impossible to pay atten-

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

Figure 1. Ernest Mancoba, *African Madonna* (also known as *Bantu Madonna*), 1929. Yellowwood, 86 by 22 by 17 centimeters, collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

Figure 2. Ernest Mancoba, *Composition*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 53 by 62 centimeters, collection of Jens Olesen

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

Figure 3. Ernest Mancoba, *Composition*, 1948. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, collection of the Cobra Museum, Amsterdam

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

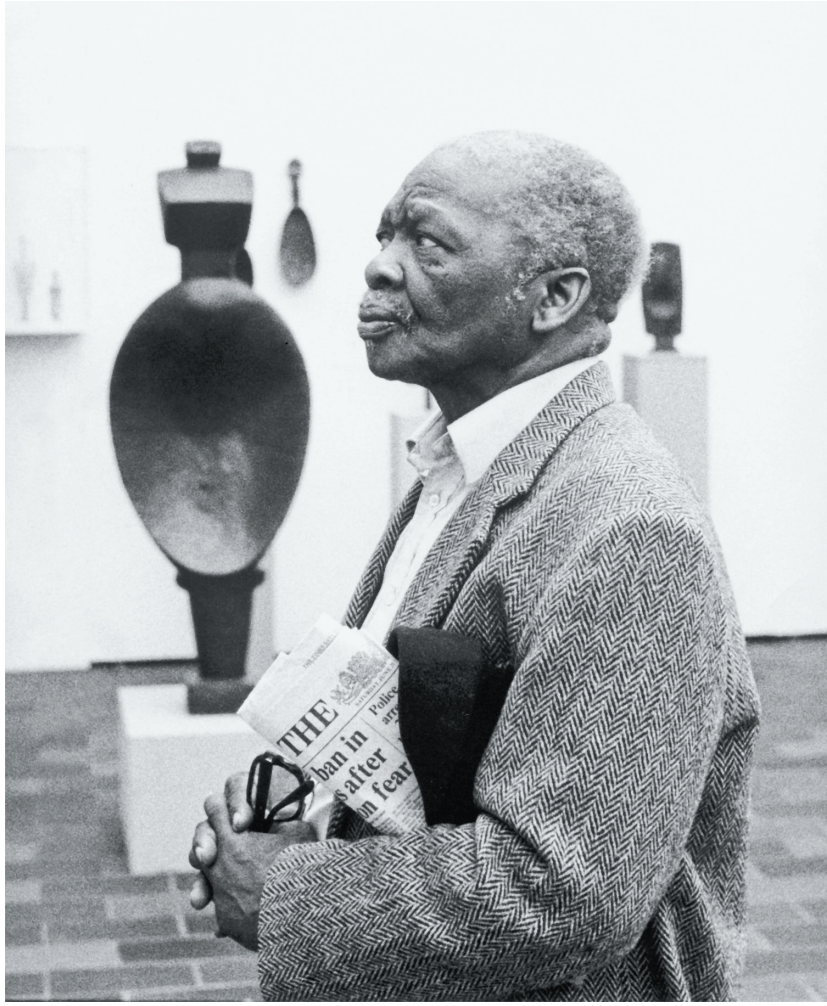

Figure 4. Peter Johansen, *Ernest Mancoba*, ca. 2000. Black-and-white photograph

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

tion to the life and works of individual artists in a critical manner equal to their Western counterparts. Hence, the life stories of artists such as these remain largely invisible. To highlight this point, I return to Mancoba's life and work, as in his artistic journey we find an embodiment of many complex experiences associated with African modernism.

Mancoba was already an established sculptor when he left South Africa. At the time of his departure to France, his *African Madonna* (also known as *Bantu Madonna*), carved in 1929 and held by the Johannesburg Art Gallery, appears to be the earliest South African interpretation of the Holy Virgin that is not European in appearance. Unlike most church sculptures in South Africa for which imported oak or teak was favored, Mancoba carved his figure of indigenous yellowwood. Elza Miles points out, "His sculptures consisted of ecclesiastical and secular pieces. In both these genres he had Africanized the prevailing Western norms of iconography and aesthetics."[35] She argues that Mancoba was undoubtedly—at least until further research shows otherwise—the first urban-born South African artist to break the tyranny of representative imitation and the Western canons of proportion. His sculpture *Faith* (1936) is indeed singular in its interpretation of the Virgin Mother and child and differs a great deal in its rendering of form and proportion from other contemporary pieces on the theme. Miles, the author of the only full-length book on Mancoba, notes that *Faith* demonstrates Mancoba's ability to merge classical African and modernist European forms, themes, and techniques in a style unprecedented in 1930s South Africa.[36] This is clearly demonstrated in the artwork's rough surfaces and chiseled carvings that form the contours of the depicted figures' bodies. *Faith* also signals a departure from Mancoba's earlier representational ideas embedded in traditional and classical continental African sculpture. *Faith* recalls the minimalism and simplification of forms observed in the work of early cubists and other European avant-garde modernists of the early twentieth century, such as in Constantin Brancusi's *Kiss* (1908). As Miles notes, "It was in *Faith* that Mancoba first reconciled to the art of Africa and freed himself of the Western Christian-Colonial Style."[37]

In Europe, Mancoba gradually shifted from sculpture to other media such as painting, drawing, and printmaking. His earliest-known oil painting, *Composition* (1940)—included most recently, after a long period of being hidden from public viewing, in Enwezor's Short Century—clearly illustrates his adventurous spirit and ability to transcend the prevalent aesthetic of South Africa's avant-garde, which at the time manifested itself in

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

the work of white South African artists and groups, such as the New Group, which dominated the artistic scene in the late 1930s.[38] Mancoba's *Composition* and other paintings he did in Paris demonstrate his familiarity and ease with contemporary European modernist styles and aesthetics. Such ease is also demonstrated by his membership in CoBrA; several of his pen-and-ink drawings were included in earlier CoBrA retrospectives, including one held in Paris in 1982–83. Ironically, much more recent traveling retrospectives of the CoBrA group, such as the ones at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Holland, and the Hayward Gallery for the Arts, have pointedly ignored Mancoba and omitted him.[39] This should not come as a surprise, considering the exclusionary practices of mainstream museums and the Western art world. As Rasheed Araeen correctly points out, "What has happened to Mancoba is not unusual or unique. Every African, Asian, and Caribbean artist who defied the colonial predetermination of their subjectivities and what they were expected to produce as art had faced the same fate."[40] Moreover, reading Mancoba's own reflections on his relationships with CoBrA confirms his awareness of resentment and the exclusionary practices he sometimes experienced.[41] Later in his life, especially after the end of apartheid, Mancoba started to gain recognition. In November 1994, after an absence of fifty-six years, Mancoba returned to South Africa to attend the opening of Hand in Hand, a retrospective of both Mancoba and his wife, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.[42]

How do we then assess Mancoba's contribution? Today, many in the field of modern African art recognize his importance as an accomplished early African modernist. Yet, as Araeen argues, most of the writings on Mancoba so far have not gone beyond the recognition of his historical importance and the unjust exclusion from historical narratives of his contributions to CoBrA. In a famous open letter addressed to African intellectuals, Araeen calls for a serious critical study of Mancoba's formal innovations and accomplishments to African modernism as a movement and in the larger narrative of global modernism. In Araeen's terms, "Modern art history is constructed and legitimised on the basis of formal innovations, among other things, that produce successive movements from one period to another, giving rise to the constant production of new ideas that are fundamental to the dynamic of the system."[43] Using Mancoba's pivotal *Composition*, Araeen asks us to move beyond the simple reading of the work as indicative of mixing African iconographies with European techniques to a more critical

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

study of the structure of the painting and the ways in which the elements are arranged within the rectangular canvas and whether they yield a new and radical innovation in painting as a modernist medium in the 1940s. Such a reading in his view situates *Composition* as not only an encounter with modernism but one that produces a form "whose significance lies" beyond its "African-ness" but "more importantly in its temporality and historicity."[44] The work can be situated only within 1940s Paris, which provided Mancoba with an experiential encounter with the kind of knowledge that triggered his imagination to produce such a work, thereby situating it historically in terms of significance and accomplishment. In that sense, Mancoba's work could be viewed as a precursor to abstract expressionism, which emerged in the 1950s in the United States, making a true historical breakthrough within mainstream modernism.[45]

Olu Oguibe, however, argues that "Mancoba's achievement was not that he was part of a modernist movement that erased him from history (as it was bound to) but that he helped define African modernity."[46] This Oguibe illustrates by showing the turning points in Mancoba's work and by tracing what he understands to be the sensibilities underlying those turns, that is, "from a concern for the mere liturgical within European traditions to an interest in the mechanics and syntax of African sculpture and eventually a personal resolution of the divergent historical trajectories that constitute a colonial or postcolonial modernity, including expatriation and nostalgia."[47] This, he argues, made Mancoba arrive at a stage of resolution analogous to the emergence of modern individualism in African consciousness.[48]

Mancoba's accomplishment, therefore, lies in his daring break from the expected and his persistence in pursuing his path as a free artist who, like his European counterparts, wished to explore the limits of artistic experimentation despite colonial constraints.[49] Mancoba's story is only one facet of the complex narrative of African modernism, which we must now attempt to reconstruct, theorize, and document in art historical studies as integral to the canon of modern art. The urgency and significance of such a task becomes more evident when we realize that the art and contributions of this first generation of pioneer modern African artists have been poorly documented, if at all. Like many masterpieces of classical African art, most of the works produced by these pioneer artists are now scattered in European and American private collections. One fears that the destiny of these modern artists will become like that of the creators of those classical masterpieces, anonymous, forgotten, and erased from history.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

Notes

1 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ernest Mancoba: An Interview," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 18 (2003): 14–21.

2 CoBrA was a radical postwar collective of artists and poets from Denmark, Belgium, and France. The name CoBrA, coined in 1948, refers to Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, where CoBrA members lived. Highly influenced by the surrealist philosophy of automatism and spontaneity, the work of the group—mostly painting—emphasized emotionally expressive work that sought inspiration from the art of the self-taught, children, and the insane and from so-called tribal art. Hence, members' paintings and drawings show many images of fantastic creatures and intense emotion. Despite members' disdain for theorizing, the politics of the CoBrA artists was radical and influenced by Marxist philosophy. CoBrA was an anti-individualist collaborative group in which poets painted and organized exhibitions and artists wrote manifestos and collaborated with poets to produce illustrated booklets. The collective was short lived (1949–51), but its work, aesthetics, and style remain influential and are considered a precursor for movements such as abstract expressionism and action painting, as in the works of Jackson Pollock.

3 The West's willful blindness regarding the history of modernism is not surprising, considering the exclusionary mechanisms built into the very definition of the dominant narratives of modernism. See Salah M. Hassan, "Introduction: Unpacking Europe," in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, ed. Salah M. Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001), 12–25.

4 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 242.

5 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

6 As a cautionary note, the Afrocentric school is diverse in its output and mostly concerns itself with revisioning and critiquing colonial and Western hegemonic narratives of African history and cultures. However, in most cases, rather than addressing current political or cultural issues, the Afrocentric movement ends up reclaiming and glorifying ancient Africa, most specifically the Nile Valley civilizations.

7 Paul Wood, introduction to *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 7–33.

8 Rasheed Araeen, "Our Bauhaus Others' Mudhouse," *Third Text* 3.6 (1989): 3–14.

9 T. J. Clark reaffirms this understanding of modernity in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 7.

10 Nigel Wheale, "Postmodernism: A New Representation?" in *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Nigel Wheale (London: Routledge, 1995), 5–32.

11 Briony Fer, introduction to *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Francis Frascina et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 3–49.

12 For an example of this use, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

13 Wood, introduction, 7–14.

14 Raymond Williams, "When Was Modernism?" in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992), 23–27.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

15 Gwendolyn Wright, "Building Global Modernisms," *Grey Room*, no. 7 (Spring 2002): 124–34, 125.
16 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 242.
17 Ibid., 243.
18 According to Michel Foucault, "When I say 'subjugated knowledges' I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity." See Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 7.
19 Leslie A. Adelson, "Against Between: A Manifesto," in *Unpacking Europe*, 244–55.
20 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.
21 Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1–34, 15–16.
22 Naoki Sakai, "Dislocation of the West and the Status of the Humanities," in *Unpacking Europe*, 196–217.
23 See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity"; and Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
24 Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," 24.
25 Stuart Hall, "Museums of Modern Art and the End of History," in *Modernity and Difference*, ed. Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001), 21–22.
26 Okwui Enwezor, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).
27 See Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910–2003*, rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005). For more information on the first generation and modern art movements such as neo-pharaonism, see "Egyptian Awakening," in *Modern Egyptian Art*, 10–31. For further information on modern Egyptian art, see Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a useful time line of Egyptian modern art, see Salwa Mikdadi, "Egyptian Modern Art," in Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2000, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egma/hd_egma.htm (accessed February 9, 2010).
28 See Salah Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expression of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics," in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (London and Cambridge: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 1999), 214–35.
29 Clémentine Deliss, ed., *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995); and Enwezor, *The Short Century*.
30 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4. For Gilroy, the image of the sailing ship recalls the experience of slavery, the Middle Passage, and the circular movement of ideas (between Africa and its diaspora in Europe and the Americas), which captures black modernity

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

as a transnational experience in essence and diasporic in its spatial configuration. As Gilroy argues, "I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central [organizing] symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. . . . Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political [artifacts]: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs" (ibid., 4). The insights offered by Brent Hayes Edwards in "The Uses of Diaspora" and his other works are helpful in tracing the genealogy of ideas, concepts, and movements such as Négritude and pan-Africanism, in which diasporic African intellectuals, such as Franz Fanon, George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, played crucial roles. See Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 19.1 (Spring 2001): 45–73; and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

31 I am referring here to the idea of "blackness" in the sense elaborated in Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109–10. See also W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness" in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), especially chapter 1.

32 See Robin D. G. Kelley, "How the West Was One: On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora," in *The Black Studies Reader*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41–46.

33 See Deliss, *Seven Stories*; Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, eds., *Authentic/Ex-Centric: African Conceptualism in Global Contexts* (The Hague: Prince Claus Library and the Forum for African Arts, 2001), published in conjunction with the 49th Venice Biennale, 2001; Simon Njami, ed., *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005); Laurie Farrell, ed., *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003); Enwezor, *The Short Century*; and Shannon Fitzgerald, ed., *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (St. Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2003).

34 Among the few books on individual African modernists are Elza Miles, *Lifeline out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba*, trans. Waveney Davey (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1994); Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008); and Olu Oguibe, *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West* (London: Kala Press, 1995).

35 Moreover, as Elza Miles points out, "This piece was later to play a role similar to that of the classical African pieces of Central and West Africa, which Mancoba admired in the British Museum. Of those pieces he once observed that they were carved for the preservation of group-life. In 1936 the *Madonna* similarly served the people of the community of Polokwane in Limpopo when she was brought from the humble chapel where she was kept at Grace Dieu to St. Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. She was displayed in the cathedral to raise funds for those in need in the drought-stricken Limpopo. A sum of £27 and 300 rations were collected." See Elza Miles, "Ernest Mancoba: An Appreciation," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 18 (2003): 4.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024

36 For an extensive discussion of *Faith*, see Miles, *Lifeline*, 24–25. *Faith*, as Miles notes, "is one of the many works by Mancoba of which the whereabouts are unknown" (ibid., 24). The only documentation we have of it is a photograph that appeared in Johannesburg's *Star*, on June 8, 1936. Cited in Miles, "Ernest Mancoba," 4.

37 Miles, *Lifeline*, 24.

38 The New Group was a collective of young white South African artists who studied in Europe during the early to mid-1930s and who were influenced by the prevalent modernist aesthetics of the time. They returned to South Africa in the mid-1930s to form a group to challenge the conservatism that dominated the art scene at the time.

39 See Peter Shield and Graham Birtwistle, *COBRA: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2003), the companion catalog of CoBrA's first comprehensive exhibition in the United Kingdom. Held from May 3 through June 15, 2003, and organized by the Hayward Gallery for the Arts Council of England, the traveling exhibition was curated by Peter Shield and Roger Malbert. For the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Holland, see Ludo van Halem and Marcel Hummelink, *CoBrA: The Colour of Freedom: The Schiedam Collection* (Rotterdam: Nai, 2003).

40 Rasheed Araeen, "Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's Place in the History of Art of Our Age," *Third Text* 19.4 (2005): 411–17, 412.

41 Obrist, "Ernest Mancoba."

42 Mancoba holds two honorary doctorate degrees, conferred on him by the University of the Western Cape for his contribution to culture in South Africa and his alma mater, the University of Fort Hare. From 1997 to 1999, he received a grant from the Krasner-Pollock Foundation.

43 Araeen, "Modernity, Modernism," 415.

44 Ibid., 416.

45 Ibid., 417.

46 Olu Oguibe, "The Location of Ernest Mancoba's Modernism," *Third Text* 19.4 (2005): 419–20, 419. Oguibe also argues, "The new strategy, evident in the work of Ernest Mancoba from the mid-1930s, involved a redefinition of African modernism by electing classical African art as its model. It displaced the iconography of the European Enlightenment and chose African sculpture and forms as the source of inspiration, the point of departure, and yet the frame of reference" (ibid.). See also Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 58.

47 Oguibe, "Ernest Mancoba's Modernism," 419. See also Olu Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," *Third Text* 16.3 (2002): 243–59.

48 Oguibe, "Ernest Mancoba's Modernism," 419.

49 As Miles notes: "When he was offered a commission to carve 'models of natives and cattle' for the display of the Department of Native Affairs at the Empire Exhibition in 1936 in South Africa, Mancoba declined the offer. He could not comply with the need for such tourist art in the service of colonial desires and expected gaze." Miles, "Ernest Mancoba," 12.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/109/3/451/470354/SAQ109-03-01HassanFpp.pdf by guest on 09 April 2024