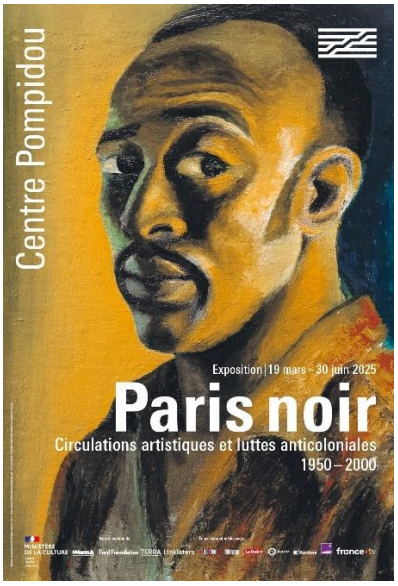
Centre Pompidou



Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Paris noir" exhibition

‘Paris noir (Black Paris). Artistic circulations, anti-colonial resistance, 1950-2000’ traces the presence and influence of Black artists in France, from the creation of the journal *Présence Africaine* to the *Revue noire*. It highlights 150 artists of African descent, from Africa to the Americas. In this podcast, thirteen leading figures – artists, archivists, guides, art historians – speak up, along with Alicia Knock, curator of the exhibition.

With: Kévi Donat, Sylvie Glissant, Franck Hermann Ekra, Eskil Lam, Jezabel Traube, Florence Alexis, Annouchka de Andrade, Kra N’Guessan, Frantz Absalon, Diagne Chanel, Elodie Barthélémy, Henry Roy, Ted Joans, Édouard Glissant

Colour code:

In black, guests'voices

In blue, Alicia Knock's voice

In **green**, narration voice

In purple, vocal archives

In red, all the other sound indications

Podcast transcription

Reading time: 23 minutes

0. Introduction

[Jingle of the show]

Today, we enter the exhibition "Paris noir (Black Paris). Artistic circulations and anti-colonial resistance, 1950-2000", on the 6th floor of the Centre Pompidou in Gallery 1.

The "Paris Noir" (Black Paris) exhibition traces the presence of 150 African, African-American, and Caribbean artists in Paris during the second half of the 20th century. It spans from the creation of the *Présence Africaine* review in 1947 by Alioune Diop—centered around the Négritude movement, and serving as a bookstore, publishing house, and gathering place for artists and intellectuals from various Black worlds—to the creation of *Revue Noire* in the 1990s.

This exhibition accompanies 50 years of decolonisation in Paris, which functioned as an anticolonial and pan-African lab, offering artists a space to envision emancipation. It allowed these artists to align with political struggles and decisively contribute to redefining modernities and postmodernities in Paris.

The exhibition challenges the idea that artists left Paris for New York after World War II by showcasing a different story—one that opens the odyssey of Paris-Monde (Paris-

World) along geographical axes previously ignored by institutions. Paris Noir is not only Paris-New York but also Paris-Fort-de-France, Paris-Dakar, Paris-Johannesburg, Paris-Algiers, Paris-Port-au-Prince, and more.

The exhibition presents Paris as a relational and meeting space, inviting visitors to discover new landmarks of Paris Noir, such as schools, cafés, and galleries.
[Transitional sound]

1. Pan-African Paris

The introductory room immerses visitors in the pan-African and anticolonial Paris of the late 1940s and 1950s, centered around the Présence Africaine bookstore.
The publishing house organised the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists, attracting figures like James Baldwin, Édouard Glissant, and the intellectuals of the Négritude movement. An iconography of Négritude emerged through artists who met through this platform, including the Brazilian Wilson Tibério and the South African Gérard Sekoto, who shared his experience in the *Présence Africaine* review.

The room brings together various key sites of Paris Noir such as cafés that served as hubs for meetings and debates, and jazz clubs, as music is a central theme of the exhibition. The painter Beauford Delaney, James Baldwin's spiritual mentor, arrived in Paris in the early 1950s and painted jazz groups before creating iconic portraits of Baldwin, marking a decades-long artistic dialogue.

[Let's hear now Kévi Donat a guide, podcaster and creator of the "Paris Noir" tours. He discusses the creation of Présence Africaine and a major event organised by the bookshop: the 1956 International Congress of Black Artists and Writers.]

Présence Africaine was founded in the wake of World War II in 1947, by Alioune Diop, a Senegalese politician and an important figure in Black culture. He started out with a premise: at the time, Africans had been present for years, at least since the 1920s and

1930s, in the Latin Quarter: mainly students on scholarship who came over at the time from the immense colonial empire to study in Paris. Présence Africaine was a meeting place, at 25 bis rue des Écoles, a stone's throw from the Sorbonne university.
It would make its mark in the history of Black philosophy in the 20th century.

The Congress held in September 1956 at La Sorbonne, was a turning point.
Alioune Diop, founder of Présence Africaine, took the initiative of holding this congress, against a background of imminent decolonisation. He invited all the most important people to meet at the Sorbonne, to discuss the future. All sorts of personalities attended or took part, such as Richard Wright, who set things off.
But also, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon-Gontran Damas, Frantz Fanon, Abdoulaye Wade and Cheikh Anta Diop, many of the most prominent voices in the Black World. One of the attendees was a person I admire very much: the American novelist and journalist James Baldwin.

When he arrived in Paris in 1948, he had not yet published anything. One of the many interesting points regarding Baldwin, was that he refrained from the all-too-easy perception that all the Amreicans were nasty racists and that all French People were nice and non-racist. What Baldwin soon discovered was that in France, he was seen first as an American, rather than a Black person. So he was not subjected to the same treatment as young Blacks arriving from Africa, the French Caribbean, or French Guyana. Nevertheless, he did say that in Paris he found a propitious context and environment for his writing. He spoke, for example, of a kind of indifference displayed by Parisians, and which was exactly what he needed in order to create. He ended up spending nine years in Paris, before returning to the US. In the 1960s, he became an important voice in the struggle for civil rights in the US. He also fell in love with France and came back to live here. He died in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, near Nice, in 1987.
[Transitional sound]

2. Édouard Glissant, the All-World

This section features a circular matrix representing the Black Atlantic, an ocean connecting Black worlds from Africa to the Americas. The circular form metaphorically resembles a disc, highlighting how these worlds communicated through music.
It also echoes poet and intellectual Édouard Glissant's concept of All World and the Caribbean Space as a realm of continuous cultural translation. The matrix portrays Paris as a space for intercultural dialogue.

[Sylvie Séma-Glissant is an artist, psychoanalyst and director of the Whole-World Institute. She was Edouard Glissant's partner from 1982.]

Édouard Glissant arrived in Paris from Martinique in 1946. He expressed his first impressions by describing Paris as "an island which absorbs everything around it and immediately diffracts it." Édouard said in an interview in 1957: "Christopher Colombus headed out and I'm the one who came back. Transatlantic travel has been reversed to forge new relationships."

I believe that for Édouard Glissant the importance of art hinged on the very special relationship he had with his artist friends, rooted in fraternity. This exhibition features many artists for whom Édouard wrote: Agustín Cárdenas, his Cuban brother, Wifredo Lam, of course, René Corail, Victor Anicet, from Martinique and Sarah Maldoror. They formed a constellation of artists. I think it is important to read Édouard Glissant in the presence of all these other artistic imaginations.

For me, this room in Black Paris exhibition is like an Aztec calendar where time and places meet, it puts forward a vision of the world as it is.

[Edouard Glissant, extract from *La créolisation du monde*, a film by Yves Billy and Mathieu Glissant.]
[Wave sounds]

I don’t like stories that are created to give power, to signal power or to corroborate power. I don’t like the idea that the one who directs the world has the right to “say” the world. That’s what History is.
“Saying” the world is to enter into real, complete contact with the tremor, the hailing, the warming, the sweetness, the violence, the eruption. That is why poetry is beautiful.
[Transitional sound]

3. Paris as a school

“I tried, for example, to go round all the galleries. I have to admit that only one out of three dealers even bothered to look at my canvases. They expected a guy in a loincloth, with a bow and arrow, not an admirer of Winslow Homer and Seurat.”
These are the words of Haitian painter Roland Dorcely, sharing his experience of Paris where he trained with Fernand Léger.
In the late 1950s, Paris was both the capital of art history and modern avant-gardes. Artists like Bob Thompson studied classic art at the Louvre, and Georges Coran infused medieval tapestry with Césaire’s poetry and his homeland’s tropical nature. By reinterpreting mythology and religious themes, they crafted radically modern works. They also reinvented portrait traditions such as the 17th century style of Velasquez, as seen in Iba N’Diaye’s portrait of his niece *Anna*.

[Art critic and curator Franck Hermann Ekra presents the career of Côte d’Ivoire artist Christian Lattier and his work *Le Christ,* created in 1957.]

Christian Lattier was an architect and sculptor from the Ivory Coast who, in 1966, won the First Price at the Dakar World Festival of Black Arts. He returned to his country after the African independence movements, thinking he’d be able to make his mark there. To free himself from the codes and preconceptions of what an African artist should be, he developed his own form of art, which he called sculptural expression.

He used string as his preferred medium, as string reminded him of an esoteric tradition from western Ivory Coast, the tradition of liana bridges. The initiated would weave a liana bridge overnight and nobody would know, the next morning, how it was built, nor who did it.

The Christ is an artwork that Christian Lattier created in Bingerville, near Abidjan. He placed it a chapel, painting it black to make it stand out against the white wall. During restoration works, a construction painter saw fit to paint it red. Lattier was furious but as he had a good sense of humour, he decided to add feathers to make his Christ look more Indian. This Christ is one of suffering, but it is also a self-portrait.

Most of Lattier's artworks are linked either to religion and mythology, or to social and societal criticism. There is also a dimension of mockery to his creations. He works behind the back of Authority somewhat. There is a significant biographical dimension to Lattier's work. His family had connections with the Progressive Party of Ivory Coast, which opposed the Democratic Party of Ivory Coast, the African Democratic Rally founded by the father of Independence, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. There is, therefore, ambiguity and ambivalence in Lattier's understanding of his own works.
[Transitional sound]

4. Afro-Atlantic Surrealism

In the late 1940s, Cuban artist Wifredo Lam returned to Paris from Cuba, Haiti and Dominican Republic, bringing with him Afro-Atlantic forms influenced by Césaire's poetry. His work, including his masterpiece *Umbral*, introduced a totemic iconography blending political and religious references. This approach inspired other artists like Ethiopian Armenian-Pan-Africanist Skunder Boghossian and Cuban sculptor Agustín Cárdenas, who explored the totem motif in their works.

[Eskil Lam, son of artist Wifredo Lam and co-author of his Catalogue Raisonné, describes his father's work, *Umbral*, displayed here.]

My father, Wilfredo, came to Paris for the first time in the 1930s, at the end of the Spanish Civil War. That's where he met Picasso, who introduced him to the Parisian world of art. He also met André Breton. And then it all turned to war and exodus.
My father was forced to leave via Marseille on that famous ship named the Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle, which took him to the West Indies. That was when he met Aimé Césaire, a meeting that turned out to be crucial. He spent the war years in Cuba, where he produced some major creations, including his most important painting, now considered a masterpiece: *The Jungle*. After the war ended, in 1946, he returned to Paris. He then travelled regularly back and forth between Paris and Havana, before settling in Paris more permanently in the early 1950s. There, he began to produce a whole series of paintings, including *Umbral*, exhibited in this room, which breaks away somewhat from his previous works.

Umbral was to be a turning point, with its rather monochrome background. There are these three rhombic shapes, three kind of double triangles, which are quite typical of my father's work from that period onwards. There's an almost geometric dimension that prevails, with sharp, almost aggressive points, compared to the soft lines we were used to see.

What's interesting about this piece is that it marks a beginning, yet at the same time it reflects many of the characteristics that he developed in the 1940s around the Santeria theme. Santeria is a kind of Voodoo syncretism, a combination of African faiths and Catholicism that was quite widespread in Cuba. Indeed, the title *Umbral*, means threshold. This could mean the doorstep of a house, but also the crossing point between two worlds. And many different shapes appear in this painting. The small round heads, for example, are Elegguás, mixed characters which, again, are omnipresent in my father's work.
[Transitional sound]

5. The Leap into Abstraction

During the late 1950s and 1960s, many American artists contributed to Paris's international abstract trends. Ed Clark, inspired by Nicolas de Staël, produced large, carefully structured paintings.
Haitian pioneer woman artist Luce Turnier and American sculptors like Richard Hunt and Harold Cousins contributed to this assemblage-based aesthetic.
Artists like Sam Middleton incorporated jazz into gestural abstractions, while Ed Clark and Beauford Delaney explored light and color, highlighting the redemptive power of light, as James Baldwin put it.

[Jezabel Traube is the daughter of Haitian artist Luce Turnier. She retraces her mother's trajectory for us and the birth of her abstract collages.]

Luce Turnier was Haiti's very first female painter. She was born in 1924.
She attended the art centre, where she obtained a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and left for New York in 1948 or 1949. There, she was advised to come to France because, at the time, France was the place to be for painters. She obtained the renewal of her grant and arrived in Paris in 1951. Very quickly, she enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

It was in Paris that she met my father and, later, her husband, who is my sister Léonora's father. So, during all those years spent in France, we lived in the suburbs where my step-father, Christian Lemesle, had a small house. She had her studio there, at the bottom of the garden. It was an old, fairly run-down dovecote. That's where she started doing her collages.

We really were very, very poor. She had had various jobs, including one at CNRS as a secretary, sort of. I don't think she was a very good secretary, but she took a great interest in the inked wastepaper from the duplicating machine. There were no photocopiers at the time and she was fascinated by all the duplicating errors in the paper she picked up from the floor.

That’s how she started, creating compositions with cuttings from that paper.
So, she installed a large sheet of foam board against the wall of her dilapidated dovecote. There, with her scissors and the paper she brought home from CNRS in Paris, she made cuttings and used hundreds of pins to fix them to the foam board, just like that. That’s why you can still see the pin pricks in so many of her collages.
In the end, she retrieved the old duplicating machines that were destined to be thrown out at the office. She brought them home to produce her own inked paper with black, blue or red ink.

She loved that period when she launched herself into abstraction, creating abstract collages. When we arrived in France, after 1960, she had brought very little with her from Haiti and the US. We had left very hastily, in the space of 36 hours, because of Duvalier, Papa Doc, the dictator who was a great danger to our family. We arrived in France with nothing. But I can remember, as a very young child, always seeing this book about art. It featured the works of Ben Johnson, an American abstract painter. That was the only thing she brought from the US. But in France, well, it all took off. She went for it.
[Transitional sound]

6. Paris-Dakar-Lagos

The 1960s independence movements in Africa fostered pan-African unity, with cultural events like the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, organised by Léopold Sédar Senghor. Many artists who passed through Paris, including Wilson Tibério, Uzo Egonu, and Demas Nwoko, participated.

Senegal became a hub for West Africa, alongside Nigeria, where American artist Bill Hudson worked, at the Lagos Museum and reconnected with filmmaker Ola Balogun, who had filmed him in Paris.

The Mbari Club in Ibadan, conceptually born in France, developed a radical aesthetic of emancipation, championed by the *Black Orpheus* review.

[Florence Alexis, daughter of Haitian writer Jacques Stephen Alexis, is a curator, archivist and historian. She describes the career of Senegalese artist Iba N'Diaye, and his work *Tabaski*.]

Iba N'Diaye was born in Senegal in the early 20th century. He came from a mixed family, his mother being Catholic and his father Muslim. He came to France and studied architecture and the Fine Arts. He became a student of Ossip Zadkine, who introduced him to African statuary. He handled form from a sculptor's perspective. He learned from Zadkine that to reproduce a figure, object or animal, one must approach it from the inside. In fact, when you look at Iba N'Diaye's paintings, you realise he has taken a counter-relief approach but that the visual result is a relief effect. That's the sign of great skill.

Quite simply, African art became his alphabet. When Senegal became independent, at Senghor's request, he created the Dakar School of Fine Arts, the first art school on the African continent. He designed the teaching program around both African art chronology and the History of Art more widely. In 1961-1962, Senegal had barely emerged from the colonial period and mentalities inherited from colonial days still prevailed. So, there was a condescending attitude towards African creativity.

In Senegal, the Tabaski marks the end of Ramadan. Families get together after sacrificing a sheep. Of course, what interested Iba N'Diaye in the concept of sacrifice was the realisation that in the period in which he was confronted with an opposing camp, he himself had been sacrificed, politically speaking. So, Iba N'Diaye had to return to France in the late 1960s, considering that he no longer had the means to conduct the educational and artistic project he was championing.

Actually, what's interesting about the Black Paris exhibition is that it covers a virtual but vast territory, a geographical area that some researchers define as an Atlantic region. They refer to the Black Atlantic, where discoveries led to a swarm of African cultures, since the Portuguese invented the slavery system and started transporting Africans even to Europe and, of course, to the Caribbean islands, but also to Central America, South America and, obviously, North America.

Everywhere, there are African cultures that were uprooted by deportation, but put down roots and restarted to produce art, which can be seen in the work of people like Iba N'Diaye.

Personally, I think that if Paris, if France, had welcomed these artists properly, had acquired and exhibited their works in the way their artistic quality and creative talent deserved, then Paris would still be a first-class artistic hub. Nowadays, much of that energy has migrated to London, New York, etc. But I believe that has a lot to do with France's difficulty in receiving these artists and respecting them on the artistic and cultural levels on which they expressed themselves.
[Transitional sound]

7. Revolutionary solidarity

In the 1960s, Paris was a revolutionary crossroads, connecting civil rights struggles, May 1968 protests, and solidarity with Algeria. The exhibition reveals how May 1968 echoed the 1967 Guadeloupean independence riots. Martinican artist René Khokho Corail's work *Le Souci* reflects his imprisonment for pro-independence ideas. James Baldwin noted that "the Black man in the U.S. is the Algerian in France," stressing shared struggles. These solidarities culminated at the 1969 Pan-African Festival in Algiers, attended by figures like Frantz Fanon and filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, who supported Lusophone independence movements.

[Anouchka de Andrade is the daughter of Sarah Maldoror, pioneer of African cinema, and Mario de Andrade, writer and co-founder of the Angolan liberation movement.]

Sarah Maldoror arrived in Paris in 1954, I believe. Orphaned and alone, she arrived from the department of Gers in southern France, where she was born, and discovered the intellectual excitement of Paris. And that is where she created herself a family, through the Présence Africaine bookshop. She met writers, poets and intellectuals who were like her, and built herself an identity.
The first thing she did was to choose a name, in homage to *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont, naturally. This reflects her admiration for poetry but also her fierce thirst for freedom, saying: “Well, me, I scoff at those slave owners who for years, centuries, gave names to their human merchandise”. As for her, she decided she would be Sarah Maldoror.

When she arrived in Paris, she decided to take drama classes, and so she enrolled at the Rue Blanche school. It was a huge disappointment, because she was Black. This meant that all the roles she was offered were those of maids or servants. She had no access whatsoever to the roles she had imagined. At drama school she met three other people in the same situation: Toto Bissainthe, who would become a famous singer in Haiti; Timité Bassori, an Ivorian film-maker who is still alive today; and Sama Baba Kram, from Senegal. Together, they decided to create Paris’ first black theatre company. They called it *Les Griots*. A griot being a troubadour, the storyteller who would thus serve their three-fold objective:
1. To reveal and promote black authors;
2. To access roles they had been totally barred from;
3. To create a drama school for black actors. Because she would say, “We had no opportunities to perform and see what we were capable of on stage”.

Things were quite chaotic for that first company and it was difficult to make a living. So, they mostly did a lot of readings. They performed at universities and small venues, reciting plays by Césaire. But their first play was *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre.

They thought of posters and called upon Wifredo Lam to create this first one.

Then, Sarah had the idea of staging Jean Genet's play, *The Blacks*. And with her characteristic audacity, she wrote to him, saying, "The fact is, we're a young troupe, we'd like to stage your play, and I hope you don't intend to give it to White people!" Jean Genet replied favourably and the play was performed at the Lutèce Theatre. You can find an interview about it, that Sarah granted to Marguerite Duras for the newspaper *France Observateur* in 1959. It's a very, very funny interview and is simply entitled *La Reine des Nègres parle aux Blancs* (The Queen of the Blacks speaks to the Whites).

[Transitional sound]

8. Jazz-Free Jazz

Jazz, and most particularly free jazz, became a medium for artistic and political expression across geographies. Gerard Sekoto honored South African singer Miriam Makeba in his series *Les Têtes Bleues* (Blue heads), Iba N'Diaye depicted blues singer Bessie Smith, Guido Llinás celebrated Louis Armstrong, and Henri Guédon paid tribute to Charlie Parker. The exhibition creates a transnational symphony through jazz, culturally and politically empowering for the artists.

[Artist and Surrealist poet Ted Joans recites his *Jazz Poetry* in this extract from *Jazz is my Religion*, a 1980 performance at the Centre Pompidou.]

[Jazz music playing]

JAZZ is my religion and it alone do I dig the jazz
clubs are my houses of worship and sometimes the concert halls

but some
holy places are too commercial (like churches) so I
don't dig the
sermons there I buy jazz sides to dig in solitude Like

man/Harlem,
Harlem U.S.A. used to be a jazz heaven where most of
the jazz
sermons were preached but now-a-days due to chacha
cha and
rotten rock ‘n’roll alotta good jazzmen have sold their
souls but jazz
is still my religion because I know and feel the message
it brings
like reverend Dizzy Gillespie/Brother Bird and
Basie/Uncle
Armstrong/Minister Monk/ Deacon Miles Davis/ Rector
Rollins/
Priest Ellington/ His funkness Horace Silver/ and the great
Pope
John, John COLTRANE and Cecil Taylor They
Preach A Sermon
That Always Swings!!

Yeah jazz is MY religion Jazz
is my story
it was my mom’s and pop’s and their moms and pops
from the days of Buddy Bolton who swung them blues to Charlie
Parker and
Ornette Coleman’s extension of Bebop Yeah jazz is my
religion
Jazz is unique musical religion the sermons spread
happiness and
joy to be able to dig and swing inside what a
wonderful feeling

jazz is/YEAH BOY!! JAZZ is my religion and dig this:
it wasn't for
us to choose because they created it for a damn good reason as a
weapon to battle our blues!JAZZ is my religion and its international all the way JAZZ is just an Afroamerican music
and like us its here to stay So remember that JAZZ is my religion
but it can be your religion too but JAZZ is a truth that is always
black and blue Hallelujah I love JAZZ so Hallelujah I dig JAZZ so
Yeah JAZZ IS MY RELIGION…….

9. Back to Africa

From the 1970s onwards, many artists, especially from the Caribbean, turned to newly independent Africa, forming artistic movements like the Negro Caraïbe School in Abidjan. Founded by Martinican artists Serge Hélénon and Louis Laouchez, this school inspired the Vohou-Vohou movement in Abidjan, blending traditional and modern aesthetics.
The Fwomajé group, another Martinican collective, drew on African roots and celebrated cultural survival through symbolic references often drawn from the Transatlantic crossing.

[Kra N'Guessan, an artist from Côte d'Ivoire and co-founder of the Vohou-Vohou movement, talks to us about his painting *Blôlo*, created in 1981.]

I went to the Abidjan School of Fine Arts from 1972 to 1977. In 1977, I received a scholarship from the Ivorian government to study at the School of Fine Arts in Paris.

Blôlo is made on a canvas that reminds me of Paris. The actual canvas is a tarpaulin used for the awnings of café terraces. I painted it in Dabou. As scholarship students, we were each allowed 500 kg of luggage with shipping costs paid for by the Ivorian government. We could put whatever we liked into our container. So, I went home with the paintings I had done at the Yankel studio and, more importantly, various objects I had found on the streets. Among them, there was this beautiful tarpaulin.

The name of the painting, *Blôlo*, means the afterlife. I completely covered my canvas with sand and sketched directly in the sand. To me, sand is something that represents life, the fleeting dimension of humans that will turn to dust and return to the earth, and earth is something that remains eternal.
My method is to enhance things that are rejected by society. Vohou-Vohou is a way of working. Students who didn't have much money couldn't buy their materials in an art shop. We really didn't have the means to do that. We therefore had to widen our search to find alternative materials.

So, some students decided that, instead of using expensive canvas, they'd paint on bark, on whatever pieces of wood they could find and on planks that had been discarded. The architecture students teased them for working this way. In our studio, we used hammers and mallets to crush stones into powder. It made such noise that an architecture student came into our studio one day and told us off. In the end, those students left pronouncing a word, a term that means nonsense and is used at random: Vohou-Vohou. You do Vohou, you're all Vohous. That made us angry.

Later, after finishing school in 1981-84, we got together for a reunion. There were three of us. We said to ourselves that with our system of working, everybody made fun of us and our exhibitions. What could we do to defend ourselves? We said look, why not embrace the name that had made us so angry? We thought hard about it and said look, why not? Eventually, we ended up saying Vohou to mean hello!
[Transitional sound]

10. New abstractions

The 1980s saw African-American women artists in Paris developing monumental abstractions. Mildred Thompson, a multidisciplinary artist, started her *Rebirth of Light* series in Paris. These artists mixed abstraction, figuration, and critical approaches, like Mary Lovelace O'Neal's monumental self-portrait.
Caribbean artists produced conceptual abstractions, often in black and white, exploring themes of exile, memory, and the boundary between material and immaterial worlds.

[Artist Frantz Absalon tells us about his untitled sculptures, created in the early 1990s.]

I've been an artist for many years and I began working properly after my engineering studies. I've never put that qualification to use, knowing perfectly well that if I started using it, my artistic voice would be lost.

From then on, until 1989, I was between my artistic endeavours and just putting food on the table, as they say. Afterwards, I began to open up to everything that was happening, all the museums. To me, it was a whole new life, the real life. I was painting at the time, and discovered sculpture in quite a surprising way, after suffering from sciatica. And from then on, I went regularly down into the street where there were roadworks. Where there are roadworks, there are planks, and I began collecting planks.

So painting was over for me and it felt as if carving wood got rid of my pain.
So, the sculpture being concave, I carved and hollowed it out, then finished by smoothing the hollow with an application of black wax. It has stayed practically as it was, with some edges smoother than others. So, glue, wax and also Indian ink. Because with this kind of wax, even dark-coloured, it's never totally black. But by applying Indian ink underneath, you can actually get this result.

So, it's true that all these wooden planks I collected, they were often no more than two metres long. And it is easy to find in this naturally vertical material a form of expression

that can be likened to a human presence, which is directly confronted with forests, with trees, perhaps dignity and, essentially, an entire history of humankind. Because humans came from the forest, not cities.
[Transitional sound]

11. Self-Affirmation

From the 1970s, artists like Henri Guédon celebrate Black bodies in action and used art to denounce racism (*KKK* painting). Photographer and dancer Ming Smith embodied Josephine Baker, this contributed to a rising affirmation of Black identity. At the same time anti-racist and anti-apartheid activism was growly in Paris, exemplified by the 1986 protest at the Centre Pompidou.

[French artist Diagne Chanel looks back at her painting *Le Garçon de Venise* (Boy from Venice), painted in 1976.]

I started painting very early, I went to the Ecole Supérieure des Arts Appliqués, rue Dupetit-Thouars, then to the Arts Décoratifs, rue d'Ulm. That was when the real painting adventure began, and you could say that it wasn't perhaps the most contemporary, at the time, because you can imagine, in 1976, painting was considered completely obsolete.

Le Garçon de Venise was an extremely important painting for me. My inspiration has always been the Italian Renaissance and I was immediately "obsessed" by the ideal city and the representation of these very demanding perspectives, very aesthetic, with magnificent tiled floors. It represents the West, as that is my culture. And my second inspiration is 17th-century painting. There is something else that's very important for me: the representation of the figure in full-length, these paintings where the figure occupies all the space, and it is the case for *Le Garçon de Venise*.

But, in this perspective and culture that was very classical and Western, I wanted to place a figure that was not. I painted an African student who was there, at the Arts Décos school. And at the time, it was not well received! First of all, people told me that I was crazy to paint Black people, that I could never sell paintings with Black people. For me, it seemed very important, as a mixed-race person born in Paris, with very few connections with the origins of my father, who was Senegalese, I always felt like there was no representation of mixed-race and Black people, not in films, not in paintings, not in literature.

I felt and I still feel that there is a real visual strength in this painting, which is like an artistic punch, and at the same time, it is a real plea for painting. The figure seems to question the viewer. And the question is: is there a place for the son of a Black man on the Western chessboard? This sentence can also be extended to the African world: is there a place for the son of a Black man and a White woman on the African chessboard, and, in the end, on the international chessboard?

In 2022, Diagne Chanel published a book on the issue of the invisibility of mixed-race people in Europe and Africa. The title of the book, *Est-ce que ton pipi est noir ?* (Is your pee black?), comes from a remark made to her by a classmate when she was a child.
[Transitional sound]

12. Rites and memories of slavery

The 1980s celebrated multiculturalism, with artists addressing the history of slavery and maroons (fugitive slaves). Dominican artist José Castillo and filmmaker Euzhan Palcy (*Rue Cases-Nègres*) depicted these histories. The bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989 further highlighted anticolonial resistance, including the Haitian Revolution, through exhibitions like “Révolutions sous les Tropiques” (Revolutions under the Tropics) at the Museum of African and Oceanic Art.

[Franco-Haitian artist Élodie Barthélemy tells us about her 1994 work *Hommage aux Ancêtres marrons* (Tribute to my Maroons ancestors).]

My work looks at the history of Haiti and France, at transmission, at reparation for enslaved people, at the quest for emancipation and freedom.

Hommage aux ancêtres marrons is a sculpture made up of three brown heads of hair made from raw wool, presented vertically on metal triangles, like arrows attached at the top of raw wood posts. Three heads of hair for three ages in life: the explosive vigour of youth, the determined strength of adulthood, the wisdom of experience of old age. They are around my height, a little taller when young, a little shrunken with the years. I created this sculpture 30 years ago.

I was invited to Aussillon in Tarn by the Hors Champ association. Aussillon was the wool capital of the 19th century. At the time, I was painting representations of the figure of duality of which I am made. I am dual-culture: French by my father, Haitian by my mother. My paintings represented dual heads of hair. In Aussillon, I wanted to work with the materials available on site, leather and wool. When I took the raw wool in my hands, I felt the texture of my own hair. So I dressed this wool and the hair of my ancestors appeared, men and women who fled the plantations, where they were forced to be slaves, to seek refuge in the hills, in the mountains where the colonisers' dogs couldn't get to, to live free. That is who they named "maroons". By dressing their hair, I paid homage to their courage, to the strength of African culture etched in the deepest part of them.

My mother, Mimi Barthélemy was a storyteller and singer. She worshipped her ancestors. She cherished her ancestor, Armand des Platons. He was a slave commander on the plantation who rebelled against his master Bérault and joined the other fighters. Together, they won freedom for the slaves on the south of the island.
[Transitional sound]

13. Parisian syncretism

In the 1990s, a new generation of Afro-descendant artists in France created works blending multiple cultural references, influenced by urban art and graffiti.
Their work, such as Ouattara Watts' *Divination* or Nathalie Leroy Fiévée's trans-American symbols, melded sacred and personal mythologies with a feminine perspective.

Art critic and curator Franck Hermann Ekra discusses the multiple influences of Cote d'Ivoire artist Ouattara Watts and his painting *Divination*, exhibited here.

Watts studied Fine Arts. He met Jean-Michel Basquiat in Paris and he took Ouattara Watts with him to New York. But it is not really right to attach Ouattara Watts' career to that of Jean-Michel Basquiat, because he created his own mythologies using a shamanic approach drawing on Hebrew gematria, Native American signs, Kanaga symbolism from Dogon country, symbols of the Nile Valley and the Orishas, Vodún spirits from the Niger Delta. So, a wide range of motifs drawn from a wide range of universes, and a dialogue with Mark Rothko, Keith Haring, Miquel Barcelo, Hervé Télémaque and Peter Klasen.

He started to be active in the 1980s. He had the memory and knowledge of the shift of conceptual art in the 1970s, and chose painting at a time when it wasn't fashionable. These were years of training during which he found his place in the Parisian milieu, which was a bit wary towards African artists, who were almost systematically placed in a box, placed under house arrest, although he was working and considering himself as a trans-African artist, i.e. an artist spreading himself out, open to all the winds of the world.

The question of divination is an important one for him, because the universe, i.e. the cosmogonies, are very important. Reading the stars and geomancy, i.e. the possibility of interpreting destiny, is important. So, that is part of him, but it is not the only thing. In Paris, he was classmates with artists from the Vohou-Vohou movement, which was

a movement focused on materials, and it is the complexity of his work that is interesting. During these years in Paris, he also discovered the culture of painters. For him, painting is intellectual work, not only emotional.

His work is a work of assembly. He comes from the northern region of Côte d'Ivoire, where soil is used as an architectural material. So, the materials he uses can be considered sutures, a way of sewing, holding different elements together. There is always a certain dialogue too, with volumetrics, with sculpture.
[Transitional sound]

14. A new Black Paris map

The 1990s saw a rise in self-organised Black art collectives and spaces as institutional support dwindled. Cultural ambassadors like Raymond Saunders led initiatives such as the Palais du Luxembourg conference and the Paris Connexions exhibitions in San Francisco.
Associations like Wifredo Lam and Le Monde de l'Art produced internationalist manifesto. Artist squats like L'Hôpital Éphémère fostered interdisciplinary creativity influenced by Reggae, Hip-Hop, and graffiti. This maintained a vibrant dialogue between Paris and New York. Galleries and associations like Revue Noire showcased Black art in Paris and beyond, bridging France and Africa.

[Haitian photographer Henry Roy presents the context of *Regards noirs* (Black Looks), a series of photographs taken in 1996.]

I was born in Port-au-Prince in the early 1960s and my family had to leave the country very early for political reasons. So, we arrived in France, first in the south, then in the Parisian suburbs, then in Paris itself. When I was around 14, I went to Henri IV, an elite high school, which slightly shifted my trajectory, as I met the bourgeoisie of the 5th arrondissement and that was where I came into contact with art. And I decided to become a photographer, I was 18. I learnt photography from Henri Coste.

I realised that in the early 1990s, there may have been two or three Afro-descendant photographers in France, including me. There was very little representation of Black people on TV, in magazines. That was when I got the idea to create a book about black personalities in France. So, I dove in. It took me three and a half years to do the book, which I called *Black Looks.* I contacted people who were relatively well-known, hoping this would boost the project, people from the milieu of music, cinema, literature but also science.

My aim was to show an image of what French Afro-descendant people are.
I made a selection of 25 images, which are laid out a little like a checkerboard.
There is an interplay of contrasts, black backgrounds, grey backgrounds, white backgrounds; and it creates something with a certain rhythm.
There are people who are very different, with very different origins. What they have in common is that they are all Afro-descendants. They have different skin colours.
It's very important, this notion of contrast, because I wasn't looking for any kind of unity. I asked each one a question: "What does it mean for you, to be Black?"
Some responded quite negatively, saying: "for me, it doesn't mean anything".
And I found that very interesting, that dynamic.

The book wasn't well received. It was accused of being a communitarian project.
It could be seen as a provocation or a desire to detach oneself from the dominant group, to create a separate community. But that was not the case at all.

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

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