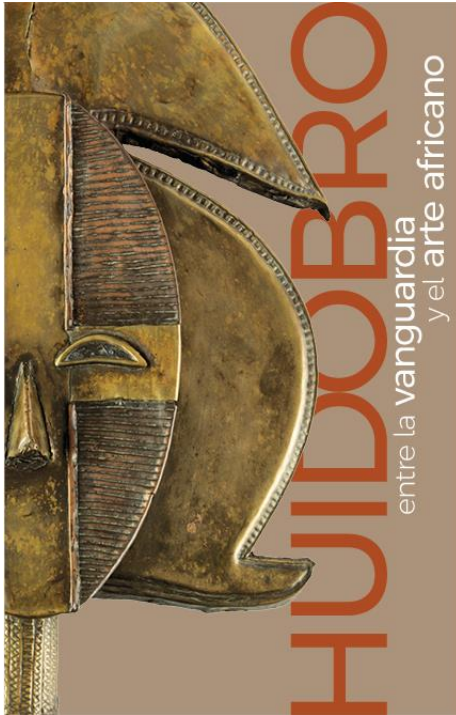




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EXHIBITION:

HUIDOBRO, AVANT-GARDE MEETS AFRICAN ART.

Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro assembled the country's first collection of African art, which he had put together in Paris between 1917 and 1925 at the height of his renown among artists of the avant-garde. His friendships with the likes of Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Jacques Lipchitz and Guillaume Apollinaire gave him his first insights into African art and encouraged him to develop one of his lesser-known passions: his hobby as a collector. These objects resonated with Huidobro and came to influence his own aesthetic framework and literary production. In their capacity for abstraction and synthesis—that is, their detachment from mimesis—he saw in the African peoples the germ of creationism. This exhibition offers a critical perspective on the poet's collection of African art, providing an

account of his background, his trajectory and the impact of his thoughts and literary works.

The National Museum of Fine Arts and the National Museum of Natural History are currently home to 30 African pieces from the Huidobro collection. This ensemble became part of Chile's national heritage in 1930, when Manuela Portales Bello (1894-1965), then separated from Huidobro, decided to sell it to the Chilean State, enriching local collections in the process.

The exhibition is divided into three themes, in each of which the sculptures from the Huidobro collection are complemented by a selection of documents, photographs, books and press clippings from the Catholic University's Huidobro Archive. These combined items serve to reconstruct the itineraries, contexts and meanings of the pieces almost a century after their arrival in Chile.



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PRIMITIVISM: COLONIAL EXCHANGE AS A DRIVER OF THE AVANT-GARDE

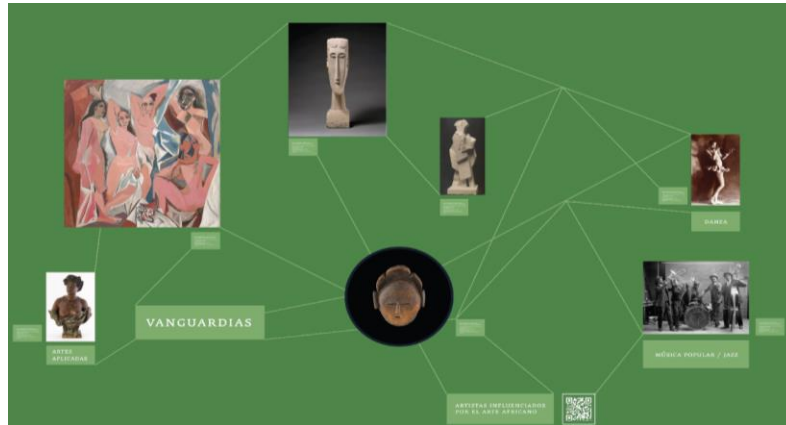
European imperialism and colonialism reached their zenith in the nineteenth century, with vast areas of Asia and Africa coming under occupation by the major powers. The process is epitomized by the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), at which representatives of various European countries came together to agree how the African continent should be divided between them. Although exchange between Europe and Africa dates back to antiquity, it now began to take off in earnest, and many hundreds of artefacts produced by peoples from all over the continent entered circulation as “curiosities” and *souvenirs* through extensive colonial trade networks. During the period, many other cultural goods were plundered and commodified to prominent European cities, feeding their anthropological museums and art markets.

Around 1900, African objects began to attract the attention of certain avant-garde artists such as Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck and Pablo Picasso, who found in their formal characteristics a driver of European plastic transformation. From that point on, interest in pieces of this type grew to fever pitch, especially among the bourgeoisie.

Between 1920 and 1930, African aesthetics had a strong influence on the most diverse manifestations of Western culture, including music, dance, applied arts and graphic design, and traces of this remain in evidence today. Interest in the artistic production of peoples considered “pre-modern” gave birth to the aesthetic category of *art nègre* or “black art”—a term used interchangeably in reference to the symbolic productions of cultural groups from sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and America (although mostly associated with the former). From 1930 onward, advances in ethnological studies yielded growing knowledge of African cultures, and the designation was replaced by another that was equally problematic: *art primitif* or “primitive art.” This exhibition refers instead to the concept of “African art.”



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VICENTE HUIDOBRO, COLLECTOR OF AFRICAN ART

One of Vicente Huidobro's lesser-known passions was his hobby as a collector. Around 1917, during his time in Paris, he assembled an interesting collection of African objects, some of which are on display in this exhibition. Huidobro's acquisition of these pieces was assisted by his friendships with writers, critics, *marchands* and artists. These were the first to engage in this style of collecting and provided him with access to the French art market. From the poet's correspondence it has been possible to partially reconstruct the itineraries of some pieces and the agents concerned, among them French and Belgian missionaries involved in the trading of artefacts from Africa to cities across Europe.

Most of the sculptures included in the collection originate from Western and Central Africa between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. The objects formed part of the rich material culture of a great many peoples and would have been used for ritual and social purposes, both transcendental and practical, including the safeguarding of relics, as symbols of status, to connect with the supernatural, and to grant protection. Huidobro never visited Africa, and his approach to collecting was shaped by an "exoticizing" Eurocentric perspective, by his relationship with the international avant-garde, and by his eminently aesthetic rather than ethnographic interest in African art.

In 1930, Manuela Portales Bello decided to sell 34 pieces from her ex-husband's African ensemble to the National Museum of Fine Arts in Chile. However, the original collection was much larger.



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“Africa is big, Africa is black”

“Black art is much closer to creation than to imitation”

“I have been in several missionary convents in Africa and Oceania to see the fetishes they have”

“I love black art because it is not a slave art”

THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN ART ON HUIDOBRO’S THINKING AND WRITING

The impact of Huidobro’s collection of African sculptures on his artistic project is as evident as it is elusive, as the relationships he formed were not always direct and transparent. What we can say for sure is that this universe of objects was part of the poet’s daily life, and much of his work between 1918 and 1930 was produced in its company.

Huidobro viewed the African pieces as complementary and, above all, as a confirmation of his aesthetic assumptions, since the plastic values that he saw reflected in them—rejection of mimesis, apparent naivety and, above all, creative freedom—were in line with the central elements of creationism.

Crucially, Africa and its inhabitants became a motif within his literary work almost as soon as Huidobro began his collection, and this can be seen in his poetry anthology *Ecuatorial* (1918). Years later, in the novel *La Próxima* (1934), Africa is portrayed as a “virgin” and uncharted land that offers refuge from the fatigue of Europe. The continent’s inhabitants are described as affable and peaceful but appear within a complex narrative that blends civilization and slavery.

During the period Huidobro became recognized as a collector of and expert in African art, and several publications, including *Action* magazine, invited him to reflect on the subject. It was here that the poet voiced the controversial phrase, “I love black art, because it is not an art of slaves.” In 1926, within the pages of *Vientos Contrarios*, Huidobro published an essay entitled *El arte negro*, which reveals the effect of his collection on his aesthetic thinking.



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Negroplastik + Kisling Exhibition

Vicente Huidobro became interested in African art just as the genre was beginning to boom. In December 1916, not long after his arrival in Paris, he attended the *1st Exposition: Kisling, Matisse, Modigliani, Ortiz de Zárate, Picasso. Sculptures Nègres*, organized by art dealer Paul Guillaume. This was Huidobro's earliest exposure to African art and the first time it had been exhibited alongside avant-garde works.

The poet's library included the book *Negerplastik* (1915) by German historian Carl Einstein, considered the first aesthetic study on the subject. Within its pages, Einstein analyzed the alleged disinterest in mimetic representation and the tendency toward abstraction that were evident among African peoples. These assertions influenced the view that Vicente himself would go on to construct and express in his essay *El arte negro* (1926).



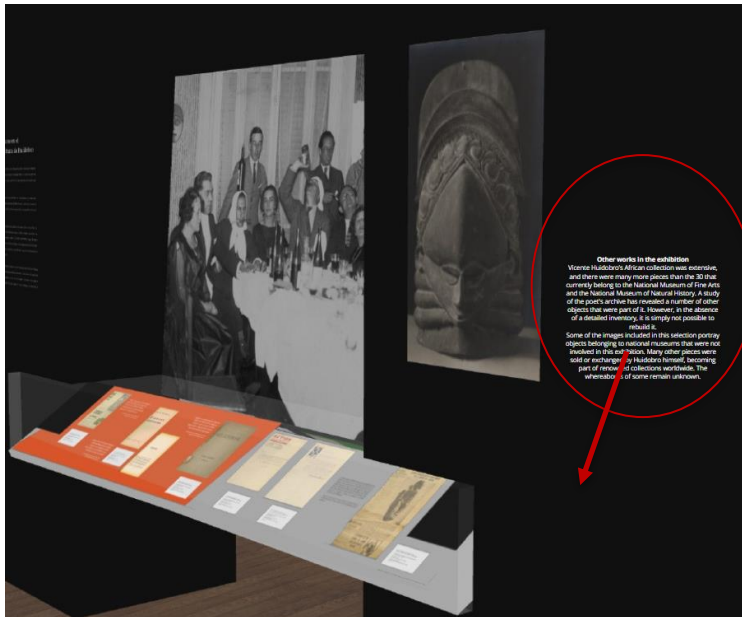
“I love black art”

Between 1917 and 1920 Huidobro contributed to various European art and literature magazines, including *Nord-Sud*, *Dada*, *La Vie des Lettres* and *Création: Revue d’Art*. In April 1920 he was invited by the editor of *Action* magazine to participate in a survey on African art and to share images of his collection. Huidobro’s response was omitted, however, as his comment, “I love black art, because it is not an art of slaves,” was considered controversial given the complex relationship that it established between Africa and slavery. In 1926 the poet attempted to resolve the controversy with a clarification:

“My answer was interpreted as flippant. The paradox or the somersault seemed obvious. Blacks are slaves; I dodged the issue by leaping over it. However, I sought nothing more than to avoid giving a direct response. Under the guise of a paradox, I believe I have presented the essence of black aesthetics. Blacks do not directly imitate nature. There is greater transposition in their works than in European art; they are not slaves to the object as white artists are” (Huidobro, *El arte negro*, 103-104).



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Other works in the exhibition

Vicente Huidobro's African collection was extensive, and there were many more pieces than the 30 that currently belong to the National Museum of Fine Arts and the National Museum of Natural History. A study of the poet's archive has revealed a number of other objects that were part of it. However, in the absence of a detailed inventory, it is simply not possible to rebuild it.

Some of the images included in this selection portray objects belonging to national museums that were not involved in this exhibition. Many other pieces were sold or exchanged by Huidobro himself, becoming part of renowned collections worldwide. The whereabouts of some remain unknown.

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Collection in public museums

Vicente Huidobro brought his African collection to Chile in 1925, and in April 1930, driven by the economic pressures of the time, his then ex-wife Manuela Portales Bello offered 34 of them for sale to the National Museum of Fine Arts. Despite unease and reluctance on the part of Huidobro, who learned of the trade while in Europe, the ensemble was quickly acquired by Hungarian painter Pablo Vidor, then director of the institution. The set was later divided, with 19 pieces of aesthetic interest remaining at the National Museum of Fine Arts, and 15 of ethnographic interest moving to the National Museum of Natural History in 1932. A total of 30 objects are currently kept by the two museums.

The collection was first exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts' *Exposición Extraordinaria del Cincuentenario* in 1930. In around 1970 the pieces were examined by specialists Livio and Armando Scamperle. In 1994, some of the sculptures accompanied an exhibition of works by Mozambican painter Malangatana Valente Ngwenya. Finally, the complete set was exhibited in 2006 following expert examination by Carlos Montoya-Aguilar.