



WHOSE TRADITION?  
AT TATE LIVERPOOL

Pacita Abad  
*Bacongo III* 1986  
Acrylic paint, silkscreen,  
plastic buttons, mirrored  
glass, wool, ribbons and  
thread on canvas  
263 × 149.5 cm

Pacita Abad in her studio  
with the *Masks from Six  
Continents* commission  
for the Metro Center,  
Washington, D.C., 1990

# Entangled Modernities

BY PIO ABAD



The Filipino-American artist Pacita Abad was inspired by the cultural traditions of the countries she visited, using techniques from Indonesian batik to Korean ink-brush painting in her unique compositions. Meanwhile, Belkis Ayón sought to tell the story of the African roots of her native Cuban culture with prints depicting an all-male secret society. As a new display at Tate Liverpool questions how artists have claimed and incorporated disparate visual styles, Abad's nephew reflects on how these two artists offer a 'vibrant riposte' to the cultural appropriation carried out by Western modernists

Pacita Abad (1946–2004) first visited the African continent in 1979. Accompanying her husband, a development economist, on a series of aid missions, she travelled to Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and the Congolese border. It was during a four-month stay with fellow Filipinos, working with UNICEF in the town of Wau in South Sudan, that Abad started developing her paintings based on tribal masks and figures – using relief sacks primed with flour and water as her canvases after exhausting the materials that she had brought with her.

In 1983, Abad started working on her *Bacongo* series, inspired by the Kongo masks she had come across during her missions. Over a period of 10 years, Abad produced eight *Bacongo* paintings, using a technique she called *trapunto*, which involved painting and screenprinting on unstretched canvas, quilting and padding the painted canvas, embroidering the surfaces by hand and then embellishing them with different materials: ikat fabric, raffia textiles, seashells, sequins and rick-rack ribbons, to name a few.

Abad's omnivorous approach to material was rooted in her immersion in different communities and different cultures, an immersion deeply informed by her upbringing in the remote island of Batanes in the Northern Philippines, her identity as a brown American immigrant, and an itinerant life surrounded by aid workers and economists. These experiences shaped Abad's empathy for the different indigenous communities that she encountered throughout her life and instilled a sense of care in her handling of their traditional motifs and materials.

When one of the works from the *Bacongo* series



Belkis Ayón at the Havana Galerie, Zurich, August 1999

Belkis Ayón  
*The Supper* 1991  
6 collographs on paper  
mounted on canvas  
139 x 300.3 cm



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appeared as part of *Masks from Six Continents*, Abad's monumental commission for the Washington, D.C. Metro Center in 1990, it was reworked into the piece entitled *European Mask* 1990. The general designation of 'European' in the title appears pointed, in contrast to the more specific attributions to the other works in the series, such as *Hunaman* for Asia, *Hopi Mask* for North America, *Kongo* for Africa and *Mayan Mask* for South America – the substitution offering a vibrant riposte to the appropriation of so-called primitive art by European artists and the Western tendency to summarise Africa as a monolithic culture.

Around the same time that Abad was working on *European Mask*, Belkis Ayón (1967–1999) was asserting the African roots of Cuban culture through large-scale prints depicting the Abakuá Secret

Society, an all-male belief system that traces its roots to Nigeria and Cameroon, and which entered the country through the slave trade. The absence of figuration in Abakuan iconography allowed Ayón to create her own visual language using collagraphy, a printmaking technique in which different materials are applied to a hard surface, creating a textured plate which is then inked and printed – an approach she adopted due, in part, to the scarcity of materials in Cuba following the fall of the Soviet Union.

A central figure in her work is Sikán, the only woman in Abakuan legend, who was put to death for revealing the secrets of the religion. *The Supper* 1991, a six-part collagraph that weaves Abakuan myth with Christian imagery, presents Sikán as a stark, white figure flanked by dark, patterned bodies, rendering her significant but isolated. Ayón saw

Sikán both as an allegory and an alter ego, a way of both literally and metaphorically centring the female struggle and constructing her own identity within her work. As a black Cuban woman, Ayón's devotion to creating work about the all-male religion was striking in its capacity to embody the mystique of a belief system from which she was excluded – offering both a celebration of unheralded Afro-Cuban traditions and a critique of Cuban patriarchy.

The works and the lives of Pacita Abad and Belkis Ayón present a stark contrast to the way the work of Western artists, such as that of Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920), has previously been disassociated from the rich traditions it has drawn from. When writing this text, I discovered that Modigliani was influenced specifically by the wood carvings of the

Baule people from the Ivory Coast, adopting the distinct narrow forms of Baule masks, with mouths placed unnaturally low on the face, in his own figures, as evident in works like *Madame Zborowska* 1918 and *Head* c.1911–12. Faced with the task of reimagining the history of art, it is essential to recognise the impact of the dispossessed and colonised, and to celebrate artists who have devoted their lives to such an endeavour. Abad and Ayón's art, and their commitment to the marginal societies depicted in their work, are important guideposts in this reimagining.

Artworks by Pacita Abad and Belkis Ayón are included in the collection display *Whose Tradition?* at Tate Liverpool, until January 2022.

Pio Abad is an artist who lives and works in London.