

## INTRODUCTION

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## TWO CENTURIES OF PROGRESS

Primitive art, the story goes, was “discovered” at the turn of the twentieth century by artists haunting flea markets and the Trocadero. From those origins it has progressed (so to speak) to wide acceptance within the mainstream of art. In 1982, with the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, primitive art reached the peak of its rise to fame (figure 1).

The opening of this new wing represented a triumph for the Rockefeller family’s collection of primitive art. Even more significantly, it was a triumph for the category of objects we call “primitive art.” If artifacts were social climbers, making it into the Met would be like having a debutante ball and being listed in the Social Register—a sign you’d really made it. Being in the Met signified visibility and institutional endorsement at last. Primitive art had made it to the top.

The market and institutional consequences were immediate. Major art museums featured temporary exhibits of exotic arts, and galleries of primitive art cropped up everywhere. When the home furnishings department of Macy’s in San Francisco had a show of primitive art from the Amazon that winter, I rushed to see it, camera in hand. In a darkened space on the seventh floor, surrounded by jungle noises piped in through the sound system, I read an illustrated brochure predicting how valuable the art would become and explaining the perils that Macy’s buyers had faced to obtain this primitive art—though the natives had received the buyers with warmth and enthusiasm, we were assured. I reflected that, whereas we all know that good art doesn’t match the sofa, Macy’s set out to convince us precisely that, tastefully arranged, it does (figure 2).

Two years later, New York was awash with primitive art: five major exhibits were on view, prompting James Clifford to dub 1984 “the

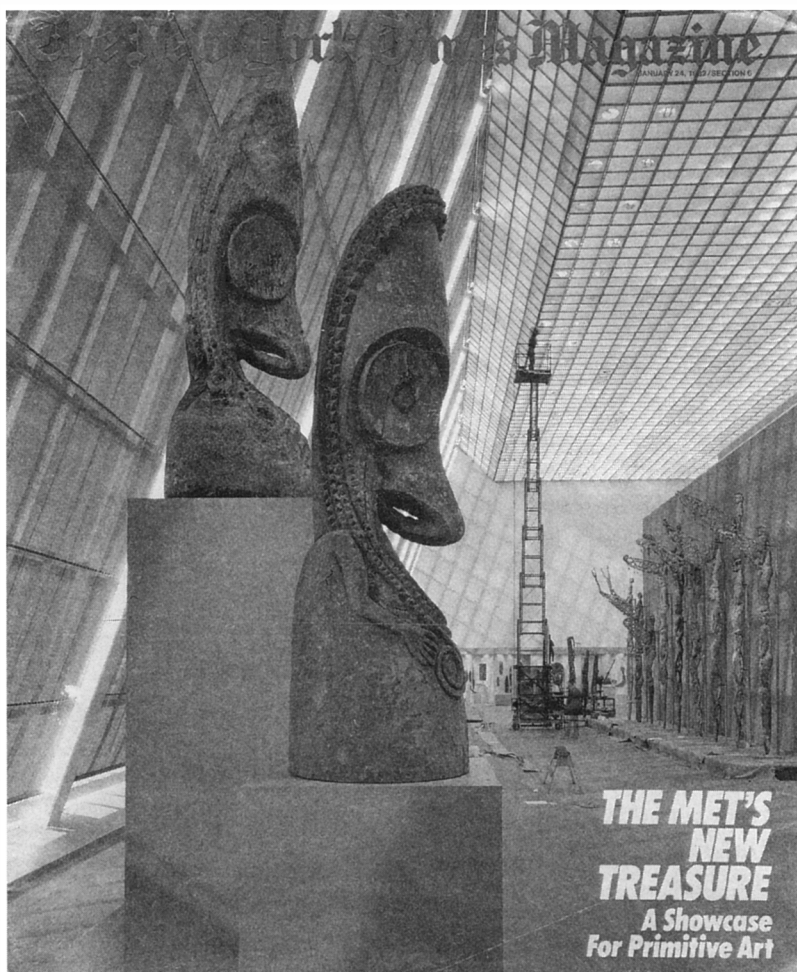


Figure 1. Institutional acceptance of primitive art peaked in the United States with the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1982.

Winter of Primitive Art.” The most important was the Museum of Modern Art’s major show “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” a retrospective of the influence of primitive art on major modern artists—the Cubists, Surrealists, and so forth. It showed, in effect, that primitive art had reached the status of a dead modern master.



Figure 2. Good art matches the sofa at Macy's San Francisco, at its home furnishings department exhibit of Amazonian art for sale in 1982.

The year 1984 was the apogee of primitive art's career in this century. But its apogee was also its nadir: 1984 marked the fact that authentic primitive art had died, or at least had become moribund.

For one thing, the exhibits during the winter of 1984 prompted a swirl of commentary that revealed just how contested the *concept* of "authentic primitive art" had become, more or less while no one was looking. Developments in the disciplines of history and anthropology during the previous fifteen years or so had eroded the notions of "authenticity" and "the untouched primitive," especially when the two were linked; and in the aftermath of 1984's exhibits, the concept of "authentic primitive art" was attacked head-on by a pack of cultural critics, leaving it bloody and for dead. (Well, at least deconstructed.) Art criticism and museology would never be the same again.

By 1984 authentic primitive art had begun to "die" for another and quite different reason: new sources to supply the artifacts that could be counted as "authentic" and "primitive" were disappearing at an alarming rate. Dealers would unhesitatingly explain to cus-

tomers who were resisting the high price of a tribal artifact, "But they're not making it anymore." This second type of "death" of primitive art—the limiting of its supply—does not kill the concept of primitive art, of course. Quite the contrary. The concept of authentic primitive art is alive and well among collectors, primitive art galleries, and the art market generally. But the supply is more limited than ever, just at the point when the art has achieved mass appeal. As a consequence, a new generation of artifacts claiming to be "art" or art-like, "authentic" and "ethnic" if not "primitive," in various permutations of the terms, has rushed in to expand its market share.

The double "death" of primitive art sketched above gives me the first part of this book's title, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*. The argument behind the title's second part, *And Other Tales of Progress*, requires considerably more explanation—the book, as a matter of fact. Here I provide a brief synopsis of the assumptions behind the book as well as an explication of its plot.

My position is that artifacts themselves are mute and meaningless. Their meanings are created by the categories they fall into and the social practices that produce and reproduce those categories.

To put it more dramatically: Discourses create objects. A "discourse" is not just a way of talking about things. Discourses materialize and narrativize categories by creating institutions and using media that illustrate, support, confirm, and naturalize their dominant ideas. Objects may physically preexist those discourses and their institutions, and they may persist beyond them; but, appropriated by new institutions, their meanings are remade and they are transformed into new kinds of objects.<sup>1</sup> The notion of "discourse" also includes the notion of power. The "power" may include the power and positioning of individual speakers, but more commonly it is the power of the categorizations of knowledge and the material practices that perpetuate them and re-create them. The material forms of discourses that I focus on in this book consist of sites for the public display of narratives and artifacts signifying the primitive and the past—state museums, exhibits, private galleries, historical reconstructions, and cultural theme parks.

"Authentic primitive art" is a set of objects constructed by the conjunction of three distinguishable discourses: of the "authentic,"

the “primitive,” and “art.” Like the discipline of art history itself, the discourses of “authenticity” and “the primitive” were made possible by the metanarrative of progress. The idea of progress, in turn, rests on the notion of linear time, which took its modern form during the course of the nineteenth century. Linear time became the microstructure of the idea of progress—an infinite, gradual gradation of cause and effect that leads upward and onward, ever better.

The idea of progress was materialized and made public in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth by exhibition practices whose major sites were the world’s fair and the museum (of science and technology, of natural history, and of fine arts); the display of the idea of progress was at its height at the turn of the twentieth century, when primitive art came into being as an object.

What does the idea of progress have to do with the primitive? Just this: Progressivist meta-stories of the nineteenth-century sort invent, indeed depend upon, the notion of the “primitive,” because the universal line of time needs a starting point from which to measure change and progress. To paraphrase Voltaire’s famous dictum about God, if the “primitive” did not exist, it would have to be invented. And it was.

The nineteenth-century narrative of European technological progress was displayed in world’s fairs and natural history museums by exhibiting objects of primitive technology and material culture; these objects signified the rude beginnings of humankind, before history and letters began, when humans lived in nature, without civilization. In the twentieth-century narrative of European modernity and modernism, invented and displayed objects of primitive art signified the “traditional” as opposed to Europeans’ modernity.

By the late twentieth century, nearly a hundred years after primitive art’s invention, the idea of progress had undergone many transformations. In some postmodern circles, the idea has been discredited. And even some strands of popular culture in Euro-America express doubts about the unceasing striving for technological advances and economic success, as measured by the gross national product, at the expense of quality of life, danger to the world’s environment, and social justice. By contrast, governments of third-world (or “developing”) countries have tended to embrace the idea of progress with enthusiasm. Originally called “modernization,” more recently “development,” the idea of ceaseless forward economic and tech-

nological movement has been given new life by an alliance composed of authoritarian third-world regimes, transnational corporations, international monetary and development agencies, and consultants from the industrialized state economies. Like early discourses of progress, these late-twentieth-century avatars invent objects that appropriate and refer to the primitive and the past, although these are more likely to take the form of glorifications of national heritage rather than primitive art, or the form of massive reconstructions of historic buildings and archaeological sites as tourist attractions, or cultural theme parks celebrating ethnicity or national history, or decorated and themed airports and hotels.

So much for my assumptions. As for the book's plot, Part One examines the double "death" of primitive art; in it I claim that the golden era of authentic primitive art came and went with the twentieth century.

To periodize the story briefly, between the two world wars, the category of "primitive art" was in the process of being formed, its boundaries defined, its canonical criteria established ("authentic," "primitive"). A taste for it in both collectors and artists was rather avant-garde, and its history in this phase is deeply intertwined with that of modernism in mainstream art; it was being validated institutionally, partly through important temporary exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art. The second phase spanned the thirty years or so after World War II; institutionally, it was validated by the opening of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York in 1957, and the period culminated and ended in 1984. I count that period the golden age of authentic primitive art, when collectors, curators, scholars, and the public alike accepted the category as established and valid and explored "its" meanings in a multitude of celebratory exhibitions, catalogs, and scholarly writings.

We are now in the third phase of the transformation of meanings of objects made by the indigenous peoples of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. This phase cannot be understood without understanding world events and the status of the "primitive" in those "third-world" nation-states whose peoples and territories were European colonies during the first half of the twentieth century. Those regions were the source of the artifacts that became "primitive art" in the

West in the first place. By the last fifteen years of the twentieth century, any unitary “story of primitive art” one might have been able to construct dissolved or fragmented. It became necessary to rename the object of study and discuss the various narratives it enters and is constructed by. I must therefore tell several stories taking place in several locations that are nonetheless intertwined.

In Euro-America during this present phase, ideas about primitive art are both hotly contested and highly marketed. The contestation became visible in museum and art market circles in the mid-1980s with the very public attacks on the concepts of authenticity and primitivism. The concept of “authentic primitive art,” in the circles inhabited by cultural critics, many art historians, many anthropologists, and quite a few museum curators, is questioned and questionable. More to the point for the art market, the supply of objects that can be promoted as “authentic primitive art” is very much on the decline. If, as dealers say, “they’re not making it anymore,” that is because the societies that formerly produced it have increasingly become part of the global economic system. The process of market globalization has consequences that result in a dwindling supply of “authentic primitive art.” In the first four chapters of Part One, I explicate the story I’ve outlined thus far.

In the United States, therefore, the late twentieth century marked the end of the golden era of authentic primitive art. Ideas about authenticity, about primitivism, and about art are very much alive, however, in the mass market if not among cultural critics. These ideas are materialized in new artifacts, where they coexist in new permutations. (Note the difference in seriousness in the claim made by the two labels “primitive art” versus “ethnic arts.”) Market forces, cultural categories, and cultural politics combine to create a variety of configurations and claims about the descendants of “authentic primitive art,” ranging from what I call “high ethnic art” to “collectibles,” “crafts,” “kitsch,” and others. I provide readings of a few of them in chapter 5 by way of exhibitions, catalogs, and market sites.

The book title’s second part, *And Other Tales of Progress*, also names Part Two. Those “other tales” are narratives of nationalism, modernization, and development. In much of the world, the idea of progress and its particular construction of the “backward primitive” has *not* dissolved and fragmented into a postmodern plethora of overlapping and contested tales. In much of the world, the descen-

dants of the people who made the kinds of things that became "primitive art" in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century are now either the elites of nation-states or their sometimes unwilling citizens. Since the mid-twentieth century, when the European colonies had revolutions of independence and became nation-states, their elites have been engaged in constructing national identities and have come to occupy different places within the global economy from those of the colonies that formerly occupied the same territories and peoples. The elites of these nation-states create narratives of nationhood, lately coupled with narratives of economic "modernization" and "development." These narratives, like Europe's analogous narratives of colonization and technological development of the nineteenth century, cast "primitive" peoples as "backward," "Stone Age," and generally unmodern, likely to be left behind on the great superhighway of history. The constructions of the primitive, of the past, of ethnicity, of nature, and of time itself have different and often unfamiliar—or sometimes all too familiar—configurations there.

These nationalist and development discourses are the topic of Part Two, consisting of case studies drawn from Mexico and Indonesia. I write about these places merely because I happen to speak their official languages and know something about them, but the kinds of processes and the configurations they reveal can be seen in many other nation-states at the end of the twentieth century. These two countries' state museum displays, monument-restoring, cultural-theme-park-designing, and airport-constructing in the interests of "nationalism" and "development" draw upon and echo themes of progress that were evident in Europe and the United States in the heyday of world's fairs and the establishment of state museums.

In the remainder of this introduction, I offer less a "history" of progress than an orienting vision, painted in broad strokes (plus cartoon graphs of my own devising), of two centuries of the idea of progress and some of its consequences for the classification and display of objects from the non-West, particularly those artifacts that were known in the United States as "authentic primitive art." (Artifacts from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas became "authentic primitive art" by the mid-twentieth century; but my story is more encompassing in earlier eras.) I begin with a prehistory of primitive art, because the things that eventually were to become authentic primitive art had not always been that. They passed through earlier



eras—curiosities first (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, with some ambiguity in the eighteenth century), then material culture (mainly the nineteenth century)—before entering the third era (the twentieth century), the era of primitive art.

### THE PREHISTORY OF PRIMITIVE ART

Europeans began collecting exotic artifacts almost immediately upon discovering the world beyond Europe. Certainly many of these artifacts were valued only for their metal and were melted down for gold and silver; but between the mid-1500s and the early 1700s, Europeans were enchanted with unfamiliar items from newly discovered lands. Countless exotic objects found their way to Europe during these centuries and were avidly collected and displayed by the wealthy, the powerful, and the scholarly either in special rooms or in “curiosity cabinets” (or *Wunderkammer*, “wonder-inspiring cabinets”).<sup>2</sup>

Seen through nineteenth- and twentieth-century eyes, the juxtaposition of the things in these curiosity cabinets is strange indeed. A 1599 account describes “an African charm made of teeth, a felt cloak from Arabia, the shoes of many lands, an Indian stone ax, a stringed instrument with only one string, a Madonna made of feathers, a sea-halcyon’s nest, a charm made of monkey teeth” (quoted in Mullaney 1983: 40). Mixed with such curiosities were works of European art, Chinese porcelain, and European armor, weapons, and shields.

Steven Mullaney has argued that “What the [Renaissance] period could not contain within the traditional order of things, it licensed to remain on the margins of culture” (1983: 44). The *Wunderkammer* can be seen as a mode of knowledge, one that sought to come to terms with the newly discovered worlds not by assimilating and colonizing them figuratively through absorbing them as aspects of knowledge—those moves were to come later—but by assigning them to the margins.

As a mode of knowledge about the exotic, the curiosity cabinet reflected a state of knowledge about the newfound Other that lasted less than a couple of centuries. Objects that had inspired wonder in the sixteenth century were relatively ordinary by the end of the seventeenth, and consequently lost part of their charm in European eyes. By then Europe was in its protoscientific and protoindustrial

phase of capitalism, and collections became far more specialized. At the turn of the eighteenth century, groupings of objects in collections prefigured the taxonomy still used in museums today: fine arts (paintings gathered by the English on their newly instituted grand tours to Italy and installed in their new stately homes, built on land made available through the enclosure movement that ousted peasants from bogs and fens, their fortunes made and titles bought with the profits from slave and rum trade, etc.); natural history (exotic flora and fauna, including the living collections that would eventually be converted into botanical and zoological gardens); and scientific instruments. The world itself and its diverse peoples were becoming more familiar, and Europe was beginning, although it had far from succeeded in, its quest not just for trade but for domination.

The eighteenth century was notable for two events in the prehistory of primitive art: the founding of the auction houses of Sotheby's and Christie's, and the effort by Linnaeus to produce a catalog of all knowledge.

Art cannot come into existence without a market for it, both buyers and sellers. Sotheby's was founded in the 1740s, Christie's in 1762; the traffic in objects of all sorts had reached a point that such institutions could come into being. In his book on art collecting, Joseph Alsop (1982) calls the art market a "by-product" of art. I would reverse the causality implied in that statement, arguing that "art" is produced and reproduced by the art market rather than causing it. In either view, the two are interdependent, and the founding of Sotheby's and Christie's must therefore be counted as a significant event in the invention of the discourse of art in Europe.

The other eighteenth-century event of relevance to the prehistory of primitive art is Linnaeus's attempt in his *System of Nature* (1735) to construct a comprehensive taxonomy of everything in God's world. Flora and fauna from all over the world were sent to Linnaeus. The principles of his vast taxonomy were based on the Great Chain of Being, which itself was based on Aristotle's hierarchical classification of the world into mineral, vegetable, animal, and human realms, and subsequently elaborated by medieval and Renaissance thinkers. In the Great Chain of Being, each category of creature had a "king" or highest form, and a lowest one.<sup>3</sup> The lion was the king of beasts, for instance; hence a fitting symbol for a king of men is the lion. Linnaeus's taxonomic categories were hierarchical, not merely stratified: that is, higher categories encompassed lesser ones, and so on