

INTRODUCTION

One day the poet Charles Baudelaire visited a naval officer who had recently come back from the South Seas with a number of strange objects. While Baudelaire was examining a small carving, the naval officer, eager to draw his attention to something else, referred to the object in Baudelaire's hands as "merely a Negro totem." Instead of putting down the carving and turning to what the officer wanted to show him, the poet raised his hand and said: "Take care, my friend, it is perhaps the true God."¹

Primitivism and the awareness of Primitive art have played a crucial role in the history and development of twentieth-century European and American art, in a number of different ways. The dynamics of how this happened are complex and varied. As can be seen in the texts that are reprinted in this book, it is a history that has been addressed by many different voices and that contains within it many different narratives, each of which has a special kind of claim on our attention.

In recent years especially, the subject has become ideologically charged; so much so, that it was only after a certain amount of hesitation that we decided to use the terms "Primitivism" and "Primitive art" in this book. As stated in the preface, we do so because the term was in common use during much of the history covered in this book, and because it also seems best to identify the subject in a concise way. But we are also aware that our use of these words is bound to upset some people. The history evoked in this book is a living one with many unresolved strands, and it still arouses strong feelings.

If the terms "Primitivism" and "Primitive art" are now so charged that the use of the words themselves has become problematic, that is in no small measure because the consideration of Primitive art and of so-called primitive peoples has been tainted by a considerable amount of racism, and because it has been linked to a number of cultural issues that may be only indirectly related to the art but have had an enormous impact on how that art has been studied and written about. These issues include the history and ongoing discourse about colonialism, the economic disparities between what came to be known as the Developed and Third Worlds, and the stresses and strains created by the increasingly hybrid nature of modern culture. Hence, although the texts included in this anthology focus largely on the plastic arts, there are unmistakably strong undercurrents of all these other discourses. One of the most interesting aspects of the texts in this book has to do with the way they show how these discourses themselves were in constant flux throughout the twentieth century.

One way to tell this story, which is the way it was first told in Europe, is that



Figure 1. Entrance hall of the new Musée d'Ethnographie (now Musée de l'Homme), Palais du Trocadéro, Paris, 1882. Engraving after a drawing by de Haenon. From *Le Monde illustré* (May 16, 1882). Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

sometime around 1906 a number of young artists—mostly French, but also some German—began for the first time to look seriously at sculptural objects that had been made in Africa, in the South Seas, and in the Americas. Up until then, such objects had not been considered art, but were treated rather as curiosities—like the “Negro totem” that the sea captain showed to Baudelaire. These artists saw in Primitive art a unique kind of pictorial inventiveness and imagination, which was especially suggestive and meaningful in relation to their own ambitions. They expressed great enthusiasm and admiration for the objects they saw, they collected and studied them, and the objects had a marked influence on their own art.

For many years, this part of the story was dominated by Maurice Vlaminck, who by his own account “discovered” African art in a bistro near Paris sometime in 1904 or 1905, depending on which of Vlaminck’s versions one reads.² For a long time Vlaminck’s accounts were taken at face value, and when his reputation as an artist began to decline his supposed “discovery” of Primitive art remained one of his main claims to fame. It is now clear, however, that Vlaminck’s first purchase of African sculpture actually took place in 1906—the same year that Derain, Matisse, and Picasso first began to look carefully at African art.³

The earliest European interest in Primitive art was strongly related to a drastic shift in conceptions of representation and of form at a time when advanced artists were moving away from the Renaissance tradition of verisimilitude and naturalism. The Post-Impressionists, especially Cézanne, had played an important role in opening the eyes of the younger artists to the possibilities of non-mimetic representation and of using “distortions” from naturalistic norms for expressive ends. In doing so, the younger artists saw themselves as being very modern, and also as making contact with ancient traditions—such as Egyptian, archaic Greek, and medieval European art—that had not only eschewed naturalism but seemed to be involved with deeper, more spiritually compelling kinds of expression. When Primitive art was first discovered by modern artists, it seemed to contain a freer sense of plastic inventiveness and a greater emphasis on pictorial structure than any other art forms they knew, and it also seemed to evoke a deeper and more universal sense of humanity.

Primitive art was different from all the other exotic arts that these artists were familiar with—such as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Islamic—in a number of significant ways. Unlike those other arts, Primitive art had no known historical development and seemed to exist in a kind of temporal vacuum. The idea that the origins of Primitive art, like those of prehistoric art, were lost in the mists of time allowed for a fair amount of romantic speculation and rumination about it, even though a number of writers tried to place it in some kind of historical context. For example, although Guillaume Apollinaire (1917) acknowledged that it was difficult to date African sculptures, he believed that they unquestionably were related to Egyptian art, from which he felt they probably derived—

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though he allowed for the possibility that it was the African works that influenced the Egyptians. A few years later, in a postscript to "Negro Art" (1920), André Salmon asserted that African art definitely influenced Egyptian art: "Negro art preceded all the other arts." This historical issue remained an open one throughout most of the century. As Georges Salles pointed out in 1927, Primitive art had not been able to "find shelter in the field of archaeology," as had Asian art, because of its relative perishability and because of the climactic and social circumstances in which it was created. For much of the century, the idea persisted that African art continued prototypes that had remained unchanged since time immemorial. Only in the 1990s did this notion begin to be widely challenged, allowing for the possibility that it had changed and developed over time—that it too had a "history."⁴

Because Primitive art was held to have had no history, it appeared to confirm widely held beliefs about the immutability and universality of great art. Visibly, Primitive art offered an alternative to the naturalistic representation of the world and suggested new and imaginative ways of conceiving and organizing forms in accordance with abstract ideas. The European artists saw African and Oceanic art in a particular way. From it, they understood something new about form, which was initially their primary concern; but they also learned something new about expression and subject matter. For unlike Asian or Islamic art, which often depicted complex, narrative subjects and had a history and development that could be traced and analyzed, the history of Primitive art was unknown and its main subject appeared to be simple and direct. Most of the works of Primitive art that were collected and reproduced in early publications represent single figures, symmetrically composed, with emphasis on the plastic rather than on the anatomical organization and structure of the figure. The figures are usually represented as being outside of ordinary activities and outside of ordinary time and space.

The early reactions to Primitive art were quite varied. Matisse's account of his discovery of African art, in which he refers to how African sculptures showed him a new way of conceiving the "planes and proportions" of the human figure, typifies what might be characterized as an analytic-constructive approach. But African art was also understood to involve other, less clearly visible ideas about the very nature and function of art. This is evident in Vlaminck's and Derain's initial responses to it, which emphasized its romantic exoticness, and is especially vivid in Picasso's reaction to the African works he saw at the Trocadéro ethnographic museum in the early months of 1907. Though Picasso may have gone to the museum in search of solutions to formal problems, while he was there he realized something about African sculpture that he had not been aware of when looking at it a few months earlier with Matisse. At the Trocadéro, he became intensely aware of the magical or power-inducing possibilities of African sculpture. And equally important, he also seems to have understood that African



Figure 2. Oceanic Room, Musée d'Ethnographie (now Musée de l'Homme), Palais du Trocadéro, Paris, 1895.

art was meant to be *used* rather than merely looked at; used by its creator as well as by its audience, so that the process of making a work of art could be conceived as an integral part of its function—as with an African “fetish,” or power object.

These initial responses to African art can be taken as fairly indicative of the ways in which Primitive art would be used by Western artists throughout much of the century: both as a visible influence on the way modern art looked and as a kind of invisible presence that affected the aspirations and functions of art—as a model for both forms and practices. The variety of the early reactions to Primitive art also anticipates the broad variety of responses that would develop over the course of the century, which is evident in the texts that are brought together in this book. Different issues come to the fore, contradictory ideas are sometimes held by the same people, and the nature of the discourse keeps changing in relation to contemporary events.

In the early literature, African and Oceanic art were grouped together (in French under the term *l'art nègre*, roughly translatable as “Negro art”) as if they were part of a single entity, even though they are of course quite different and were

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produced by very different peoples. In part, this was because both African and Oceanic art differed from European norms in similar ways, and because both were produced by nonliterate peoples, thereby posing similar sorts of historiographic problems. But there was no doubt also a racial bias involved in this blending together, which had to do with classifying the art of various dark-skinned peoples under a single category.

It is no coincidence that some of the first studies of the art of primitive peoples had an evolutionary bias and were done by men such as Alfred Haddon, the nineteenth-century British biologist, who considered naturalistic representation as the pinnacle of artistic achievement. This attitude, which implicitly privileged the European Renaissance tradition and the naturalism characteristic of nineteenth-century academic art, provided the normative frame through which other kinds of art were seen. Such aesthetic biases had obvious cultural implications and affected the way in which Primitive art was seen (or not seen) at the time. Even after they were discovered to be “art” by Western artists, the objects created by the dark-skinned peoples of the tropical colonies were treated with the same condescension as were their makers, and they were generally thought unworthy of being included within the hallowed walls of the institutions dedicated to high art. Such attitudes persisted well after the qualities of Primitive art were hailed by Europeans, as can be seen in the long-running argument among French writers about whether Primitive art should be allowed into the Louvre—an argument which persisted until the very last year of the twentieth century. (Apollinaire, one of the first writers to voice aesthetic appreciation of Primitive art, was in 1909 the first to encourage its being exhibited in the Louvre; the art itself did not make it there until the year 2000.)

In fact, only a few years before they discovered Primitive art, Western artists had been almost totally blind to it. Neither Matisse nor Picasso, for example, seems to have remarked on any of the African objects at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, even though a number of the French African colonies were elaborately represented there. The consideration of African objects as “art” had to be accompanied by a change in thinking about Africa itself, which would allow for a taxonomic shift about the objects produced there. In 1906 the massive European colonization of Africa had been going on for only about 25 years and was still in its first phase, which consisted of (often brutally) effacing local cultures and replacing them with European administrative structures. The objects that came back from the newly acquired colonies at the turn of the century were still seen as trophies or curiosities—evidence of the “savage” or childlike aspects of the people who made them.

The tropical colonies were conceived of in two different ways, both of which suited the colonial ambitions of the European powers, as can be vividly seen in relation to Africa. On the one hand, there was the romanticized view that Africans embodied a surviving instance of the noble savage, a precivilized state

of humanity that worshipped nature gods and whose naturalness and authenticity was set in contrast to the decadent West. On the other hand, Africa was thought of as the Dark Continent, a place of human sacrifice, witchcraft, and mysterious, primeval spirits. Africa was at once both attractive and repellent, grotesque and beautiful, and this duality was also extended to African art.⁵

This is reflected in the writings even of liberal-minded authors who were in some way involved with the avant-garde. In the selection from "Wild Men of Paris" (1910), for example, Gelett Burgess associates a new aesthetic of "ugliness" with Primitivism in general and with the growing popularity of African art in particular. A couple of years later, Elie Faure, who was the first writer to include Primitive art in a general history of art (1912), asserted that the people of Africa, even "in the heart of modern times, have preserved practically intact the spirit of their most distant ancestors." Although Faure was enthusiastic about the art, he was deeply skeptical about the people who made it, whom he characterized in distinctly condescending, racist terms.

An even more extreme instance of a divided attitude toward the art and its creators is found in Marius de Zayas's *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916). De Zayas noted that "Negro art has re-awakened in us the feeling for abstract form, it has brought into our art the means to express our purely sensorial feelings in regard to form, or to find new form in our ideas." But at the same time, he subscribed to the worst kinds of racist clichés. He believed that Africans remained "in a mental state very similar to that of the children of the white race," and to back up his ideas he even cited a number of pseudo-scientific statements about the supposed cerebral formation of Africans. Moreover, despite his passion for modern art, De Zayas constructed an evolutionary version of artistic development that is surprisingly traditional, in that it "follows an uninterrupted chain, beginning with the geometrical construction of the Negro art and ending in the naturalistic art of the European." De Zayas's discussion of the extreme intelligence of African children and their later "turning stupid" around the age of puberty is especially interesting. He attributes this to "a rapid declension" of mental abilities rather than to the extremely disadvantageous social situation in which colonized Africans found themselves when they reached adolescence. De Zayas's argument on this point resembles similar discussions around the same time of women's supposed biologically limited mental powers. Even the influential critic Roger Fry, writing in 1920, found problematical the relationship between the supposed inferiority of African culture and the superiority of African art. Although Fry had great respect and admiration for African sculpture, he nonetheless was able to attribute the African artist's "exquisite taste in his handling of material" to "his endless leisure," and in conclusion found it "curious that a people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word."

One of the few early writers to confront the issue of racism head-on was the

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German writer Carl Einstein, whose *Negerplastik* (1915) was the first published book-length study of African art. Virtually alone among the early writers on African art, Einstein called into question a number of the racist assumptions about Africans. He also developed what amounted to a theory of sculptural form in relation to African sculpture, based on its extraordinarily disembodied and spiritualized quality, in which form occupies space but appears to be free of the gross substance of mass. This characteristic, which Einstein referred to as a “cubic” conception, was later sometimes confounded with “cubistic” form—a term which for decades was mistakenly applied to African sculpture. Einstein’s discussion of sculptural theory reminds us that while Primitive art comprised mainly sculpture, the artists interested in it were mostly painters, at a time when painting held a dominant position among the visual arts. At first, those artists were intent on translating their new discoveries into pictorial terms. But later, Primitive art would play an important role in the redefinition of artistic categories and in the ascendancy of sculpture in relation to painting.

Because Primitive art is so closely allied with the idea of Otherness, it has served as a lightning rod for attitudes not only toward race but also toward the relations between different cultures. In many ways it was (and remains) like a reversible mirror that alternately could show either what was felt to be desirable or what was lacking in the self-image of the societies that regarded it.

Underlying these discourses is the incontrovertible fact that the exchange between the West and the so-called Primitive cultures was basically a dialogue between “white people” and “people of color,” and that virtually all such exchanges over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were based on unequal political, economic, and technological power—with missionary and anthropological approaches to native peoples implicitly used to justify military and political conquest. In the early years of the twentieth century, blatantly racist pronouncements were made with complete lack of self-consciousness, as can be seen in many of the texts below. At that time the unequal relationship between Europe and its colonies was taken for granted and became part of an oddly self-reinforcing syndrome of thought. If certain people were supposed to be inferior, it was perfectly acceptable to rule and exploit them; and since they were ruled and exploited, the reasoning went, they were obviously inferior. This kind of circular reasoning has had a long history—which goes far beyond issues of race to the relationships between social classes and the sexes. In all of these domains, issues of authority and supposed moral superiority often come to the fore. The long European tradition of belief in Providence, for example, led to the possibility of interpreting all sorts of events as somehow reinforcing some God-given notion of the social order, and to justify economic exploitation and imposed social inequality.⁶ This was reflected in the vast missionary enterprises conducted by various Christian denominations throughout the parts of the