

The Impact of Primitive Art on
Early Twentieth Century Painting
and Sculpture

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a

good job

But short for
2 semester work

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Preface

When in the course of human events one gets stuck writing a term paper, it is always wise to pick a topic that one knows nothing about. In this way the researcher learns something new every step of the way and with each book he opens the royal road to knowledge does not present itself as a burdensome bore, but rather as an exciting adventure, a rewarding experience, that borders on the pleasurable. This, of course, is strictly theoretical.

The fact is that I, as the researcher, did indeed choose a topic that I knew almost nothing about: the effect of primitive non-European art on Modern art, and at times I did enjoy the research. But alas--on the practical side of things, I hate term papers as all students do and as a result this paper became a burden almost too horrible to bear; as did all those that have come and gone before. So much for my meager attempt at an apology for turning this paper in late and an excuse for its shabby presentation.

On the brighter side of things I did learn something. All my research brought me to the conclusion that primitive art did not change the course of twentieth century painting and sculpture, single-handedly. As a matter of fact its influence on the artist has died out for the most part. We almost never see African motifs in today's art. The influence primitive art had on the early European works of this century should be viewed as a reminder of what was going through the minds of men like Kirchner, Matisse, and Picasso at the time art was being revolutionized.

As far back as western man can remember, representation
the only art.¹ The Greeks glorified the human body, and they
it in their art. The Romans glorified the state and much of their
was in the form of leaders clothed in armor. The Christian Era brought
it depictions of Christ, the Saints, and Biblical scenes. The art of
Renaissance reached a perfection peak of representation that set the
standard for all art to follow up to the latter half of the Nineteenth
Century. It was at this time that Impressionism was born, following
The Impressionists were interested with light and its effects on
color. Subject matter held no particular importance. These painters
were not trying to tell a story or recreate an event on canvas. Art became
art for the sake of art, not for the sake of the scene it was attempting
to represent. The painting became a thing of beauty in itself; apart
from the subject matter. The Post-Impressionists carried this idea even
further. Branching off from Impressionism, the Post-Impressionists developed
very individualistic styles and a study of each of those men would
reveal how differently they painted from one another. Paul Gauguin
one such individualist.

Gauguin was a loner. He sold only a few paintings in his lifetime
and was for the most part ignored by public and critic alike. Having
studied with Pissarro, he mastered Impressionism by 1883. His decision
to become an artist alienated and finally separated him from his family.²

In 1888 at Port-Aven in Brittany, Gauguin met a much younger artist
named Emile Bernard (1868-1941.)³ Bernard eventually impressed Gauguin
with his "concrete theories of painting,"⁴ and introduced him to a manner
referred to as "Synthetism,"⁵ which in all likelihood would have
been Gauguin's memorial exhibit of 1893 that first introduced the viewer
to primitive motifs.

based on Medieval Art, Japanese prints, and primitives culture.

Perhaps it was the contemplation of this manner based on primitive culture art along with the constant burden of trying to live in Europe that first prompted Gauguin to escape from Western Europe. At any rate, he felt that getting back to a more primitive way of life away from Western influences would be the salvation of himself and contemporary art.⁶ Where the Impressionists attempted a style without regard to subject matter, Gauguin attempted to create for himself a style without following the rules traditionally accepted by western painters for centuries. Gauguin wanted to get back to basics, to a more primitive way of life. With this in mind he sailed for the French colony of Tahiti in 1891. The rest of his life was spent painting in Tahiti or the farther islands of the Marquesas.⁷ The flat planes of color in his style reflect the simple life of the natives where he worked. His paintings do not reflect the style of the primitive art of the natives but his idea of getting away from classical Western painting to simple primitivism is significant.

After his death in 1903, attention was finally called to his work in a memorial exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. His color and mastery of decorative design, along with the discovery of primitive arts and primitives states of feeling for contemporary expression left its mark on the Fauves.⁸

The Fauves as an art movement started somewhere in the early 1900's. The first definite Fauve exhibit was at the Salon d'Automne in 1905. The movement is said to have received its name when the art critic Louis Vauxcelles, after seeing the vibrant color of the works in the exhibit, referred to them as "wild beasts," that is, fauves.⁹ It might very well have been Gauguin's memorial exhibit of 1903 that first attracted the Fauves to primitive motifs.

André Derain (1880-1954) was the first of the Fauves primitive art,¹⁰ in the Anthropological Museum of Paris.¹¹ Various researchers into primitivism along with the influence of Cézanne in his "Bathers" of 1908.¹² Derain and another Fauve, Maurice de Vlaminck, launched a vogue for primitive art¹³ that resulted in a primitiveism superceding a lingering vogue of Japanese prints.¹⁴

One of the outstanding artists of the Fauvist movement was Henri Matisse (1869-1954.) He was for the most part a painter but it is his sculpture that reveals the primitive influence on his work. "Two Negresses" done in 1909 is the suggestion of two figures standing side by side one front view, and the other, back view. In it can be seen the result of Matisse's exploration into the rigid thickest figurines from the Ivory coast.¹⁵ This exploration in turn led to four large reliefs of a standing female figure seen from the rear, known as "The Back," done between 1909 and 1929.¹⁶

The Fauves and the German Expressionists sprang up as art movements at different places but about the same time somewhere around the early 1900's. Having already considered the major influences primitive art had had on the works of the Fauves, let us now turn our attention to the influences it had on the Germans.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), the leader of a group of young expressionist painters that cropped up in Dresden in 1905 and called themselves die Brücke (The Bridge), was of the first of the Germans to appreciate primitive artifacts, especially those from Polynesia. He was a painter, sculptor, printmaker and critic and his art had influence in medieval woodcuts as well as the primitive Polynesian works.

The influence the primitive artifacts had on Kirchner's emotional impact of color, line, and plane than of the imitative forms. In "Street Scene," painted in Berlin around 1911, one repetition of the figures in the background is a much used convention of primitive art. After having discovered the primitive works at the Zwinger Museum of Ethnology in Dresden,¹⁷ in 1904 he spread the word of primitive aliveness and freedom to the other members of die Brücke.

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (born 1884) was a founding member of die Brücke and gave it its name which was meant to represent the bridge between the old art and the future.¹⁸

In his works are a notable primitive influence as was the case with Kirchner. One such work is the woodcut "Nude Before A Mirror" done in 1914, where the face and figure are in a style reminiscent of African masks and figurines.

Emil Nolde (1867-1956) broke with die Brücke and for many years spent his summers on the islands off the North Sea coast of Schleswig-Holstein near his birth place. He studied primitive artifacts and their influence of extreme simplicity of form and gesture in his religious paintings can be seen most emphatically in "Legend of Saint Mary of Egypt: the Conversion," done in 1912.¹⁹

Erich Heckel (1883-1970), most notably known for printmaking and a member of die Brücke also emphasizes the importance of primitive art for the early Twentieth Century.²⁰ A reflection of Brücke adulation of Gauguin and of African and Pacific-Island art is visible in "Frauen Am Meer" done in 1913.²¹

...of the treatment of the eyes and light is well
...of every Coast masks.²² Jacques Duchassaing (1881)

...interested in primitive art. The bridge was to exist around 1900

As we have seen up to this point both die Brucke and the Die Brücke were enchanted in the spell cast over them by primitive art. Let us now consider the role primitive art played in the origins of another movement initiated by one of the most influential artists of our time.

It is very likely that Matisse introduced Pablo Picasso(1881-1973) to African sculpture. They met in Paris in 1905 and it was about this time that Picasso shows subtle references to primitive motifs.²²

Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein done in 1906 has a face resembling the ceremonial masks often found in primitive tribes, although the rest of the picture is done in Cezannesque forms. There is no doubt that Picasso was influenced by primitive art at this time because he himself said he was influenced by Iberian sculpture.²³ Another hint of African sculpture can be seen in the faces of "Two Nudes" done also in 1906.²⁴ Picasso's first masterpiece, "Les Femmes d'Alger" which means "The Young Ladies of Avignon," also has faces influenced by his explorations into Iberian and African sculpture.²⁵ This painting, done in the winter of the years 1906-7, has been reputed as the Twentieth Century's single most revolutionary and influential work of art. Picasso had such an interest in African sculpture and the influence it had on him was so evident during the 1906-7 years that they are sometimes referred to as his "Negro Period."²⁶

Other artists of the early Twentieth Century reflect the influence primitive art had on them. Amedeo Modigliani(1884-1920) was a friend and follower of Picasso and his sculpture reflects African art in its' extreme figural distortions. In his female heads, done between 1911-12, the extended planes of the cheek and the treatment of the eyes and lips as small knobs are indicative of Ivory Coast masks.²⁷ Jacques Lipchitz(born 1891) was interested in primitive art. The bronzes done in Paris around 1909

hint of African figures fragmented and reassembled according to the technique of interpenetrating planes.²⁸ Constantine Brancusi might have introduced to the qualities of primitive art in sculpture. Modigliani, "The Prodigal Son", finished in 1913, displays oval, elongated forms and angular profiles that reveal influence from masks and carvings of Gabon and the Ivory Coast. It should also be mentioned that Brancusi was one of the most influential of modern sculptors.²⁹ The American sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) was very interested in primitive art. He had studied examples in the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum. He also had a fine collection of his own and in 1917 he adopted certain aspects of African art into a large marble "Venus."³⁰ Another American artist Max Weber (1881-1961) was somewhat influenced by primitive sculpture especially Mayan and Aztec works he had seen in the American Museum of Natural History.³¹ Henry Moore (born 1898) was an English sculptor whose early works of the 1920's were dominated by recollections of Archaic and primitive objects he had studied from Picasso's overblown images of that period.³² Finally, the Spanish Surrealist Joan Miro (born 1893) was attracted to primitive art in his search for "new sources of human feeling."³³

The question now comes to mind: what exactly was in the primitive works that brought Miro there in his search and attracted the Fauves, die Brücke and, to a lesser degree, Picasso's Cubists into their realm? The answer is in an examination of primitive art itself.

Primitive art, in the sense that we are using here, is defined as art produced by primitive people; that is, people who have not progressed far enough to have developed a system of writing. It can be argued that civilization was born when the gift of the alphabet was made available to man. A system of writing affords people the opportunity of examining

their past through permanent written records and this in the
culture to grow on accumulated knowledge of the past. Primitive
not having any form of writing must rely on knowledge passed on
of mouth and traditional ceremony. The ceremonies are religious
as is all of life in a primitive tribe and almost always incorporates
most primitive of all arts, the dance.³⁴ Consider the following quote

Wilhelm Wundt:

Because of the character of his locomotor organs, primitive man repeats
the movement of the dance at regular intervals, and this rhythm gives
him pleasure. Similarly, he derives pleasure even from the regularly
repeated movements involved in making the straight lines of his
drawings, and this pleasure is enhanced when he sees the symmetrical
figures that arise under his hand as a result of his movements.
The earliest aesthetic stimuli are symmetry and rhythm.³⁵

Thus in Mr. Wundt's opinion, symmetry and rhythm, a product of the cere-
monial dance, are responsible for the repeated geometric pattern common in
primitive art. The modern primitive, like his paleolithic ancestor, takes
a recognizable shape--animal or human--and then transforms the body into an
extraordinary pattern of sharp angles or curves, or lines and circles.³⁶
But what was it about these primitive artifacts collecting dust in the
museums of Europe that caused so much excitement for the artists of the
early Twentieth Century?
African sculpture was exerting an influence on the Expressionists,
Fauves, and the Cubists all at the same time but for different reasons.
The German Expressionists liked its' harsh, primitive vigor.³⁷ They held
African carving to be emotionally expressive.³⁸ In France the Fauves and
Cubists also liked the emotional impact, but they intellectualized it.

1. Louis Duménil, The Hellenistic World, p. 100.

Here I quote Sheldon Cheney:

Negro(African) sculpture gives pause to a white(European) conceit, his self-conscious show of virtuosity, his tendency to over-refinement and flourish. The negro sculptors' works, idols, fetishes and masks are direct expressions of religious emotions and are altogether impersonal. He approaches his work as if he is less important than the work itself. He has no thought of pleasing the educated spectator. The art is for itself, out of its own emotions.³⁹

Picasso especially liked the exaggeration of certain features of head, face and body. He was more interested in the formal properties than the powerful

expression.⁴⁰ Magical suggestiveness is a part of any true primitive art

stemming from the religious aspect of the tribe.⁴¹ Cubists like Picasso

incorporate the rhythm of form in primitive art for the decorative aspect

while surrealists like Miro liked the neurotic and irrational magical

quality of primitive works.⁴² A final quote from Cheney:

And now, when the claim of negro sculpture is being examined a little more dispassionately, even the most level-headed critic, if he has any glimmering of what modern art is after, must recognize that these are of more import than, for example, the art of the Roman era.⁴³

It is evident that the artists of the early Twentieth Century owe some debt of gratitude to the primitive artist who was there when they needed him to open new opportunities of freedom from the oppressive western art tradition. It is therefore fitting that Picasso included in his "Les Femmes d'Alger" an eternal tribute to the primitive artist in the form of faces derived from African ceremonial masks?

17. Journal of the History of Ideas, New York: 1931, p. 107.

18. Artforum, p. 176.

19. Ibid., p. 177.

20. Ibid., p. 181.

Footnotes

1. Louis Danz. The Psychologist Looks At Art. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1937, p. 202.
2. George Heard Hamilton. 19th and 20th Century Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture. New York, H. N. Abrams, 1970, p. 128.
3. Ibid.
4. John Rewald. Post-Impressionism From Van Gogh to Gauguin. New York; Museum of Modern Art; Dist by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1962, p. 196.
5. Hamilton, p. 128.
6. R. H. Arnason. History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture New York Abrams, 1968, p. 40.
7. Ibid.
8. Hamilton, p. 183.
9. Frederick Hartt. Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976, p. 386.
10. Arnason, p. 106.
11. Hamilton, p. 315.
12. Arnason, p. 106.
13. Jean Leymarie. Fauvism: A Biographical and Critical Study. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951, p. 139.
14. Ibid., p. 86.
15. Alfred Hamilton Barr. Matisse, His Art and His Public. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951, p. 139.
16. Hamilton, p. 317.
17. Leymarie, p. 126.
18. John Edwin Canaday. Mainstreams of Modern Art. New York: Holt, 1959, p. 427.
19. Hamilton, p. 196.
20. Ibid., p. 322.
21. Arnason, p. 181.

22. J. Russell. The World of Matisse, 1869-1954. New Books, 1968, p. 74.
23. Canaday, p. 454.
24. Arnason, p. 120.
25. Ibid., p. 121.
26. Herbert Edward Read, The Philosophy of Modern Art. New York: Meridian Books, 1955, p. 170.
27. Hamilton, pp. 320-22.
28. Ibid., pp. 329-30.
29. Ibid., pp. 317-20.
30. Ibid., p. 322.
31. Ibid., p. 291.
32. Ibid., p. 334.
33. Ibid., p. 272.
34. Louis Dana., The Psychologist Looks At Art. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1937, p. 204.
35. Ibid., pp. 203-4.
36. Eleanor C. Munro. The Encyclopedia of Art: Paintings, Sculpture, Architecture and Ornament From Prehistoric Times to the Twentieth Century. New York: Golden Press, 1974, p. 12.
37. Canaday, p. 427.
38. Sheldon Cheney. A Primer of Modern Art. New York: Liveright Pub. Corp., 1966, p. 24.
39. Ibid., pp. 285-6.
40. Hamilton, p. 209.
41. Ibid., p. 322.
42. Max Kozloff. Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 168.
43. Cheney, p. 287.

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