At Other Times: Modernism and the “Primitive”
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The characteristic shared by all modernists, and all modernisms in their eclectic variety, was a sense of being (in Perry Meisel’s term) “belated,” as coming “at the end of history.” The compulsion to start again, to “Make it New,” to discover or recover an origin, the origin, of art and to kick over the traces of a history that had somehow taken a wrong turn, led many modernists to seek renewal in the “primitive”: the catchall term comprising non-Western peoples and their cultural products (with the exceptions of Japan and China). Arthur Clutton-Brock, in an editorial on “The ‘Primitive’ Tendency in Modern Art” for the influential Burlington Magazine in 1911, expresses this sense of belatedness with a near-religious appeal to the redemptive capacities of the primitive: “So nowadays we have grown stale in art; we try to do too much, and waste our powers upon what is not essential. Our own past is a burden to us, not because its art was bad, but because . . . we feel the same need in art as the Christians felt in morals to begin again from the beginning.” Hermann Bahr, writing three years later, picks up the messianic tone: “We ourselves have to become barbarians to save the future of humanity from mankind as it now is. As primitive man, driven by fear of nature, sought refuge within himself, so we too have to adopt flight from a ‘civilization’ which is out to devour our souls.” Many of the key features of primitivism are already in place in these two short statements: a turning away from 500 years of European art as the model of artistic and cultural endeavour and a turning toward cultural others for renewal. Primitivism refutes the grand historical narrative of modernity with its assumption of a progressive teleology, but this undoubtedly traumatic breach is also accompanied by the possibility that new identifications could become possible. Modernism’s identification with the primitive, and all its cognate terms (barbarian, savage, uncivilized), was also a refutation of civilization’s dominant ideologies (capitalist, patriarchal, bourgeois).
“Opening up to difference” was not achieved without considerable deformation. The primitive was an imperialist discursive construct and despite primitivism’s rhetoric of renewal, it nonetheless drew upon and participated in the same assumptions and exotic fantasies of otherness that stoked imperial imaginations. Likewise, “primitive” signified an undifferentiated mass of peoples and cultures ranging from Africa to Oceania, without any substantive difference or distinction, all sharing a similar if not identical primitive state. The effect on the subjects of empire was to render them without history, cultural specificity, or agency. Similarly, the primitive artifacts that so stimulated modernism were very rarely understood or accorded their proper function and meaning in their own right; the iconic African mask, for example, was invariably designated as sculpture when, in its indigenous context of dance and ritual, it is more properly an element of choreography. In any event, the objects that were the talismans of primitivist renewal were neither fairly exchanged nor freely given but were the loot of imperial theft. In short, and with a few notable exceptions, modernists mistook a colonial for a primitive subject.

To seek to renew an exhausted culture with a primitive alternative is a motive as ancient as culture itself; what makes modernist primitivism different from its predecessors is the greatly increased variety and accessibility of primitive models that nineteenth- and twentieth-century global empires made available. The 1851 Great Exhibition in London gathered together for the first time the various peoples of the British Empire and their cultural artifacts and displayed them on a monumental scale. While its ostensible ambition was to celebrate British global hegemony, the exhibition also exposed visitors to an unprecedented range of non-Western cultural products. As a consequence of his involvement in designing and staging the exhibition, the architect and designer Owen Jones published The Grammar of Ornament (1856), which was for William Goodyear, writing in the 1890s, a “veritable bible of reference ... to English and American decorators, the cultivated amateur in aesthetic matters, and the professional architect.”

Significantly, the book contained a section on “Savage Tribes,” where Jones argues that European design is in need of renewal from outside and that “savage tribes” offer “the principles of the very highest ornamental art.”

Other European capitals, Paris and Berlin most notably, followed London’s lead. In Paris, the Palais du Trocadéro was built to accommodate the 1878 World’s Fair on the site of the hill of Chaillot, where the 1867 World’s Fair had been held. By 1882 the Trocadéro became the Musée d’Ethnographie (later the Musée de l’Homme) and housed the burgeoning collection of...
artifacts brought to France by expeditions to Africa and elsewhere. Live exhibitions of colonial peoples could be viewed in the Bois de Boulogne’s Jardin d’Acclimatation, and wild animal importers exhibited individual Africans. By the time of the Exposition Universelle in 1900 (again held at the Trocadéro), the public appetite for the primitive could be satiated by elaborate ethnographic exhibits, including a reconstruction of a Dahomey settlement complete with the severed heads of executed slaves.\(^7\) By the end of the century, tribal artifacts had become a major part of the collections of European metropolitan museums; in Germany, Dresden Zoo became famous for its popular reconstructions of Indian, African, and Samoan villages, and the ethnographic museums of Dresden, Hamburg, and Berlin greatly increased their collections of tribal art.\(^8\) For example, in 1886 the Berlin Museum of Folk Culture held a collection of almost 10,000 African tribal objects; a remarkable haul in view of the fact that Germany had begun its policy of colonization in Africa only two years before.\(^9\) Commercial artists and advertising agencies also recognized the exotic appeal of the primitive, adapting tribal forms for commodified images of mass consumption. It is, perhaps, in this broader context of both expansive museum expositions and displays and the commodified exotic of mass culture that the modernists’ engagement with the primitive should be placed: the avant-garde’s rarified – “aestheticized” – response to a ubiquitous and increasingly popular image from consumer and civil culture.\(^10\) 

It was at the Trocadéro’s Exposition Universelle of 1889 that Gauguin was first exposed to Tahitian artifacts, and when he travelled to Tahiti two years later, the effect was a complex mingling of exoticism, atavistic longing, and sexual gratification. Yet however much Tahiti contributed to Gauguin’s self-fashioning of the modernist myth of the artist as primitive, Tahiti did not fundamentally change his art. Certainly, his style marked a radical departure from the models offered by European history of art, and his subject matter – Tahitian people (usually women and often naked) and Tahitian artifacts (often religious and usually monumental) – presented new subjects for a European painter, but otherwise there is little that is “Tahitian” about these paintings. Tahiti is merely the subject of representation, and, in that respect, Gauguin’s Tahitian pictures differ little from exotic and erotic nineteenth-century French Orientalist images of Middle Eastern harems, except that Gauguin adopted a post-impressionist rather than a realist style. Tahiti exists on the “other side” of the canvas, as it were, and the viewer gazes in through a post-impressionist lens: nowhere do Tahitian artistic forms transform that vision nor do they impinge upon the manner of the rendering. Such

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presentations of savage subjects, novel as they might have been, did not constitute the “renewal” offered by the primitive. Rather, the substantial challenge to primitivists was to effect a more radical transformation of the modes of representation through primitive style and morphology.

That radical transformation did not begin in Tahiti or elsewhere in the primitive/colonial world but in a familiar location: in June 1907, Picasso visited the Trocadéro’s collection of African masks (see Figure 3.1). This famous (or infamous) encounter with African artifacts has been marked out as the moment when African art entered more fully into the consciousness of the modern European artist. Picasso had been at work on a large canvas depicting five naked prostitutes on display on the stage of a brothel. In May or early June, he seems to have completed the painting in its first form, in which the prostitutes’ heads were painted to resemble archaic Iberian stone sculptures. After the visit to the Trocadéro, “Les demoiselles d’Avignon” was reworked and he remodeled some of the prostitutes’ facial features to resemble the African masks he had seen. The painting depicts female sexuality as crude and aggressive, and to emphasize this Picasso has three of the women wearing African masks. The painting has always been controversial, originally for its frank sexual content and dramatic use of line and color, but more recently for its problematic representation of debased female sexual aggression and for the assumptions the painting seems to express about the savage nature of African culture. The result is a vision of female sexuality that is made to converge with primitive fetishism. In “Les demoiselles d’Avignon” the masks are emptied of any original cultural significance other than their usefulness to Picasso as an emblem of savage sexuality. The art historian and Picasso expert William Rubin captured a sense of the primitive shock of “Les demoiselles,” when he wrote that the picture conveys “something that transcends our sense of civilized experience, something ominous and monstrous such as Kurtz discovered in the heart of darkness.”

This view seems to be borne out by Picasso’s own atavistic responses to the Trocadéro masks, as reported in a conversation with Malraux some years later: “For me the masks were not just sculptures. They were magical objects . . . intercessors . . . against everything – against unknown, threatening spirits . . . They were weapons – to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help free themselves. If we give a form to these spirits, we become free.”

Yet despite the questionable associations of female sexuality and African savagery, the painting is a major achievement in another sense. Picasso’s innovation was to go beyond the figurative representation of the primitive
and to rework African forms into the practice of painting itself. The representation of the masks and bodies appears broken into simplified two-dimensional parts juxtaposed in a near-abstract composition that renders the scene uncompromisingly angular and unfamiliar. African techniques of rendering spatial planes became the stylistic medium for the

3.1 Art as a system of signs: Grebo mask.
painting: a new visual language of planes and facets arranged in a complex relationship of related viewpoints, which connect both an abstract and a mimetic style. The masks were not only used by Picasso to express his ideas about female sexuality and its closeness to dominant notions of the primitive, they also transformed the way in which he looked at form and painted space.

While never escaping the atavistic undertow, the current of primitivism shifted after “Les demoiselles” away from Gauguin and toward an exploration of the methods for revolutionizing style. “Les demoiselles” is the greatest landmark of Picasso’s period nègre (1906–09), and its experiments with style led to Picasso’s prolonged collaborations with Georges Braque, the creation of the “moment” of cubism, and, so too, to the irrevocable transformation of modern art. Yet this familiar art historical narrative was repeatedly rejected by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Picasso’s friend and patron, whose Parisian gallery was the “cradle of cubism.” For Kahnweiler, in the characterization of Yve-Alain Bois, “The formal affinities between African art and Picasso’s painting in 1907–8 are illusory,” that is, the African influences are merely “morphological”: simple quotation or copying of form without a deeper understanding of its meaning. Kahnweiler insisted upon a profound difference between primitivism as mere style and primitivism as sensibility, finding an example of the former in the work of Vlaminck, whose art “certainly shows the influence of the appearance of African sculptures, but not the slightest understanding of their spirit.” For the influence to be substantial and to pass beyond appearances to become real, it had to extend beyond the morphological to the structural.

Kahnweiler was very clear about precisely when this crucial turn occurred. It came in 1912, five years after “Les demoiselles” was finished, and it was born out of a “collusion” between a Grebo (African) mask in Picasso’s possession and his cubist paintings and paperboard sculptures of a guitar.

The discovery of [Grebo] art coincided with the end of analytical cubism. The period of investigation of the external world was over. The Cubist painters now meant to represent things by invented signs which would make them appear as a whole in the consciousness of the spectator, without his being able to identify the details of the sign with details of the objects “read.”

Kahnweiler’s point is not that the guitar resembles the mask – that is the illusion of appearances that Vlaminck was guilty of – but that Picasso’s study
of the mask helped him to understand that both mask and painting are made of arbitrary signs.

These painters [Picasso and Braque] turned away from imitation because they had discovered that the true character of painting and sculpture is that of a *script*. The products of the arts are signs, emblems, for the external world, not mirrors reflecting the external world in a more or less distorting manner. Once this was recognised, the plastic arts were freed from the slavery inherent in illusionistic styles. The Grebo masks bore testimony to the conception, in all its purity, that art aims at the creation of signs.¹⁶

The conceptual character of primitive art was to be found, then, not in its exotic morphologies, nor in its shocking manipulations and deformations of proportions, but in the realization that art was like a language: a syntactic arrangement of arbitrary signifiers. A tube for the sound hole, a tube for an eye, and if not tubes, why not nails, or wine bottles, or jam jars, or anything? The Grebo mask had confirmed for Picasso that illusionistic naturalism was most definitely not the point, but rather that a picture could be composed of arbitrary signs, which sustain its coherence through its own internal proto-linguistic syntax without reference to an external world of mimesis.¹⁷ As Rosalind Krauss has it, just as “words operate in the absence of their referents; indeed they can be said to outrun the limits of those referents,” so too do visual signs.¹⁸

However, Picasso was neither the first, nor the only one, to have experienced an epiphany at the Trocadéro. In the introduction to his extremely influential book, *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), Wilhelm Worringer claims that while visiting the Trocadéro at Easter 1905, he was suddenly taken by a state of “spiritual intoxication,” which he attributed to the onset of the “urge to abstraction.” Worringer’s subject in *Abstraction and Empathy* is an alternative history of art, which is deeply indebted to Alois Riegl’s innovations in art history: the importance of “style,” abstract decoration and ornamentation, and *Kunstwollen*, the “will to form.” Worringer’s thesis is that the driving compulsion that underpins art is fear. To primitives, the world is a terrifying, threatening, and uncontrollable space of nature: “He stands so lost and spiritually helpless amidst the things of the external world, because he experiences only obscurity and caprice . . . that the urge is so strong in him to divest the things of the external world of their caprice and obscurity in the world-picture.”¹⁹ Filled with “cosmic anguish,” the primitive artist does not seek a naturalistic representation of those forces that threaten, but seeks escape in the order offered by abstraction. Abstraction allows the suppression of the space of nature: it is space “which links things to one another” in
overwhelming multiplicity; it “is the one thing it is impossible to individual-
ise.” “All endeavour was therefore directed toward the single form set free
from space.” Abstraction, Worringer argues, following Riegl, consists of
“setting things as individual material phenomena not in space, but in the
plane”: transforming depth relations into plane relations created human
order from natural disorder, purifying, separating out, and controlling the
environment. “In the necessity and irrefragability of geometric abstraction he
could find repose”; “it was the only absolute form that could be conceived
and attained by man.”20

Abstraction lies very deep, indeed: it is the primal Kunstwollen, the origin of
all art, born out of cosmic anguish and the spiritual dread of the space of
nature. The opposite of abstraction, as the binarism of his title indicates, is
“empathy”; if abstraction is the product of “cosmic anguish,” then “empathy”
gave rise to naturalism in art. Naturalism’s empathy readmits space as the
connectedness of all things, and rejects the plane of abstraction as alienation
from a world that naturalism wishes to embrace. The history of Western art
shows the eclipse of abstraction by naturalism, and the triumph of empathy
over anguish, but the urge to abstraction not only “stands at the beginning”
but “remains the dominant tendency” at a “high level of culture” among
certain peoples outside Europe, where a connection still exists with the
primitive in the persistence of the “purest regular art form” – “this highest
abstract beauty.”21 Worringer goes further, dismissively countering Theodor
Lipps’s widely accepted axiom that “aesthetic enjoyment is objecti-
fi
d ified self-
enjoyment,” with his own remarkable deconstructive formulation that “our
aesthetics is nothing more than a psychology of the Classical feeling for
art.”22 Step outside that naturalistic aesthetic tradition bequeathed us by the
“Greeks and other Occidentals,” Worringer advises, and it is possible to
rediscover in the aesthetics of others the inorganic and crystalline arts of
abstraction. Here, the history of art is essentially a history of “style,” or rather
“styles,” either abstract or naturalistic. The emphasis solely upon style
“liberated” modernism from materialist historiography and from geograph-
ical restraint: contemporary modernists could seek the inspiration of abstrac-
tion across time and cultures, guided only by their sensitivity and their ability
to recognize abstraction when they saw it.

It would be difficult to underestimate the influence of Worringer’s theor-
ies on emerging expressionist painters like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the
Dresden expressionist group Die Brücke, Emil Nolde, Kandinsky, and the
Blaue Reiter group. The art historian Carl Einstein leaned heavily on Wor-
ringer’s work for his own Negerplastik (1915), as did the British art critic
Herbert Read. Emerging modernist movements found analogies to the primitive “urge to abstraction” in their own anxieties about modernity, incessant warfare, and the terror of the space of the city. Worringer’s work not only sanctioned a sense of “affinity” with the artworks of others, particularly from Africa and the South Seas, but also energetically proposed a realignment of Western aesthetics, not as objectified pleasure, but as culturally and historically determined discourse that could be remade, altered, and made whole again by attention to the abstract aesthetics of non-Europeans. But Abstraction and Empathy and the work that followed, Formprobleme der Gotik, also presented a universal theory of art as style that was increasingly antagonistically dichotomized between pristine primitive abstraction and decadent civilized naturalism, with a growing emphasis upon the desirability of abstraction’s dehumanizing distance from human subjectivity. It is a dichotomy that the Nazis would fold into their Spenglerian aesthetic of rejuvenating barbarism and opposing “pure” to “degenerate” art. It is cruelly ironic that the intellectual godfather of German expressionism also provided support to its nemesis.23

Worringer’s primitivist theories also found an audience among English-speaking modernists; T.E. Hulme, the poet and critic, and founder of imagism, claimed to be the first in England to have discovered Worringer. He explored the implications of Worringer’s ideas for literature together with the members of the Poets’ Club (1908) and the coterie of proto-modernist writers who met at the Café Tour d’Eiffel (1910), which included Ezra Pound, F.S. Flint, Edward Storer, Francis W. Tancred, Joseph Campbell, and Florence Farr. Hulme claimed to have arrived at many of Worringer’s conclusions before he read Abstraction and Empathy, arguing in particular that the modernist interest in primitive abstraction and geometric art signaled a more comprehensive rejection of the values of rational humanism that underpinned Greek and Renaissance art; he nonetheless acknowledged that his essay on “Modern Art and its Philosophy” was “practically an abstract of Worringer’s views.”24 Worringer helped Hulme articulate a wider modernist refutation of humanism that was increasingly right-wing and fervently anti-romantic: an “undisguised contemptu mundi,” as Joseph Buttigeig has it, that was deeply influential for both Pound and T.S. Eliot.25 For Hulme, Worringer’s primitive geometric abstraction was a search after “an austerity, a perfection and rigidity which vital things can never have,” which discards any notion of progress, and subordinates man “to certain absolute values”; it was a mark of “disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes.”26
Indebted though it was to Worringer, Hulme’s intervention in the British literary and artistic scene was nothing if not timely, for, as Virginia Woolf famously remarked, “On or about December 1910, human character changed.” The catalyst for such a momentous transformation was an exhibition mounted by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London, entitled “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” which included works by Manet, van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso. Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings were, according to Marianna Torgovnick, the hit of the show and sparked an interest in the primitive that was sustained by the *Athenæum* publication of Fry’s important essay “The Art of the Bushmen” (which was read by Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, and T.S. Eliot, amongst others) and by the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition two years later, which was dominated by Picasso and Matisse, “the most aggressive and innovative primitivizers.”

Despite the confusion and derision the primitivists provoked in their audience, by 1914 Clive Bell could confidently declare that “[most] people who care much about art find that of the work that moves them most the greater part is what scholars call ‘Primitive.’” And the sculptor Henry Moore would later announce, “Once you’d read Roger Fry the whole thing was there.”

Fry’s writings on primitive art – the Bushman essay was followed by essays on “Negro Sculpture” and African, Aztec, and Islamic art, and by his major work, *Vision and Design* (1920) – cover some familiar ground. There is the familiar Hulmean contempt for the traditional version of art history: “What a right little, tight little, round little world it was when ... Greek art, even in Roman copies, was the only indisputable art, except for some Renaissance repetitions!” Fry also joins Picasso in asserting the conceptual character of primitive art; the primitive artist “does not seek to transfer a visual sensation to paper, but to express a mental image which is coloured by his conceptual habits.” And again, the primitive was not a threat to Western art but a “stimulus” to “regain its power to express emotional ideas,” and “to get back to that ultra-primitive directness of vision” that had been lost to formulae and dogmatism. But while he regarded African sculpture as “greater ... than anything we produced even in the middle ages,” he nonetheless finds it “curious that a people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word.” Fry’s laudatory writings on primitive art are heavily freighted with Social Darwinist prejudices, as Torgovnick characterizes them: “a virtual encyclopedia of colonialist assumptions.” He makes no cultural distinctions at all: art from Africa is either “Bushman” or “Negro,” and nowhere does he explore its provenance.
or function. The main purpose of primitive art is its role in bringing about the next cycle of renewal in Western culture.

Although the impact of the primitive on the visual arts was complex, its imprint was at least visible, as style if nothing more. Literary primitivists had no such comparable models of primitive literary style to aid their efforts at renewal of the literary text. While it could be argued that D.H. Lawrence’s primitivism comes closest in spirit to Gauguin’s celebration of primitive sexual emancipation, the literary primitivism that was analogous to Picasso’s transformation of sensibility involved a much more nuanced and entangled set of negotiations.

T.S. Eliot was the principal modernist poet to engage with this conceptual primitivism, but his engagement was filtered through secondary sources: anthropology, cultural theory, even the classics. For example, in 1920 he wrote a review of a performance of Gilbert Murray’s translation of Euripides’ Medea at the Holborn Empire. Murray was a leading figure of the group of classical scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists (including Jane Ellen Harrison, F.M. Cornford, and A.B. Cook), who effected an epistemological shift in the perception of the ancient world. Their work drew very heavily on new discoveries in archaeology and anthropology, particularly the works of James Frazer, and gave rise to a primitivist vision of the classical world, as Fredric Jameson has it, of “culture[s] of masks and death, ritual ecstasies, slavery, scapegoating, phallocentric homosexuality [which was] utterly non- or anticlassical [with] some of the electrifying otherness and fascination” of the world of savages. Although Eliot disliked Murray’s translation, for which he reserved one of his harshest criticisms – he had “blur[ed] the Greek lyric to the fluid haze of Swinburne” – he clearly felt it to be an important moment in the progress of the primitive. What began as a negative review of a translation of a Greek play becomes a tour de force of name-dropping as Eliot demonstrates his very extensive reading in anthropology and cognate new disciplines: Frazer, E.B. Tylor, Ribot, Janet, Freud, Bergson, Harrison, Cornford, Cook, Durkheim, Robertson Smith, and Wilhelm Wundt are all enlisted into Eliot’s vision of a wide-ranging and multidisciplinary primitivism.

Eliot repeatedly turned to Frazer’s The Golden Bough as a source of primitive information, most prominently in The Waste Land; for him it was the arch example of “the mythical method,” which, he “seriously” believed, would make “the Modern world possible for art.” But in spite of Eliot’s championing of Frazer, there was one name listed in the review that was of even more significance to Eliot: M. Lévy-Bruhl, with his Bororo Indians.
who convince themselves that they are parroquets.” Eliot read Lucien Lévy-Bruhl as a student at Harvard in 1913, in tandem with Frazer, providing him with a theoretical framework upon which he could hang the primitive materials that *The Golden Bough* supplied in abundance. For Lévy-Bruhl, anthropological data demonstrated primitive psychic structures rather than Frazerian cultural evolution. The Bororo people mentioned in the review refers to a central Brazilian tribe whose members, it was reported, believed themselves not to be human beings but a species of parrot. “Primitive mentality sees no difficulty in the belief that such life and properties exist in the original and in its reproduction at one and the same time. By virtue of the mystic bond, a bond represented by the law of participation, the reproduction is the original, as the Bororo are the araras [macaws].” In Lévy-Bruhl’s formulation, “civilized” mental operations are founded upon perceived differences in the way objects are apprehended, whereas “primitive” mentality relies upon the distinctions of the ideal qualities inherent in objects.

In an earlier review of 1916, Eliot discussed the significance of the Bororo as being “capable of a state of mind into which we cannot put ourselves . . . the mystical mentality . . . plays a much greater part in the daily life of the savage than in that of the civilized man.” The Bororo occupy a crucial role in the development of Eliot’s primitivist thinking, not only as an emblem of prelogical mentality or savage cognition, or as a type of archaic religious consciousness, but as an alter ego of the modern poet. Lévy-Bruhl’s notions of the mental characteristics of primitive peoples – their distinctive capacities for “polysynthetic perception,” “collective representation,” and “mystical participation” – enabled Eliot to make the much wider claim that “the prelogical mentality persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet.” In a further review of 1924, Eliot asks a rhetorical question: “Is it possible for art, the creation of beautiful objects and of literature, to persist indefinitely without its primitive purposes?” The poet’s purpose is to bring this repressed consciousness to light and “to purify the dialect of the tribe,” since, uniquely in modernity, the poet still retains the primitive faculty, like the Bororo, of living in metaphor. As David Spurr and David Chinitz, among others, have argued, Eliot’s anthropologically inspired model of a highly integrated primitive society underpins his notions of the ideal Christian community, expressed in *After Strange Gods*, in which the poet has the significant role of sustaining and strengthening the communal sensibilities expressed in myths and rituals; a vision of an ideal society that, for Eliot, is under constant threat from – if not already destroyed by – modernity. If the primitive stands for that archaic purity, then the opposite is
the Jew, characterized as a freethinking, “half-educated or ill-educated,” peripatetic, heterogeneous figure, bringing “chaos and futility.”

Although many have understandably baulked at Eliot’s anti-Semitism, by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century few would have dissented from his valorization of the primitive. There were some notable exceptions. James Joyce, like Eliot, read Lévy-Bruhl with great attention: they met in Copenhagen in 1936, and Lévy-Bruhl admired Ulysses greatly. Indeed, Joyce’s main narrative design, blending myth and history, touches on the same ground of primitive consciousness as Lévy-Bruhl and the primitivists. Similarly, Joyce’s engagement with Vico’s cyclical view of history, with its eternal return to an original state, brought him to a comparable kind of primitivism, if by a route very different from other modernists. But Joyce chose to celebrate the figure of the wandering, freethinking Jew as his major protagonist in Ulysses, while Haines, the English folklorist and primitivizer of the Irish, is despised by Stephen Dedalus as condescending and stupid. Lévy-Bruhl is even parodied several times in Finnegans Wake. Statements such as “What England did in Ireland over the centuries is no different from what the Belgians are doing today in the Congo Free State” colored his view of primitivism that “the primitive” invariably signified “the colonized.” Joyce refused to ignore the transcription of colonized as primitive: an elision that lies at the centre of the primitivist enterprise. So, while Eliot took his anthropological reading at face value as unalloyed accounts of the primitive, Joyce was much more circumspect, maintaining a critical distance and parodying anthropology as a discursive construction rooted in colonization.

The surrealists would seem to have been outright primitivists too; André Breton repeatedly employed familiar primitivist metaphors, claiming, for example, “The eye exists in its savage state ... the wild eye that traces all its colours back to the rainbow.” Likewise, his obsession with fetishistic objects or the practice of automatism, which seemed to him to take him back to an original primitive mental state, were key elements in surrealism’s ambition to achieve the “absolute reality” of the resolution of dream and reality. Yet the surrealists also emphasized the colonial contexts of primitivism, mounting anti-colonial exhibitions in Paris. The first, in 1931, titled “The Truth about the Colonies,” coincided with the official colonial exposition and displayed tribal objects, sculptures, and photographs festooned with Marxist slogans. The second, five years later at the Galerie Charles Ratton, was a less polemical affair, losing the activist slogans, but including European objects alongside African, Oceanic, and American artifacts in a group labelled “European Fetishes” in an attempt to unsettle viewers and to provoke a
realization that the civilized West shared many so-called primitive beliefs with non-Europeans. This project of “intercultural analogies” marked surrealists’ very different approach to primitivism as they turned Picasso’s idea of the conceptual character of tribal objects on its head, valuing instead their “bricolé heterogeneity.” As Hal Foster has it, “These primitivists welcomed ‘the unclassified, unsought other’ neither as ‘mediators’ nor as answers to western aesthetic problems; their significance lay in their transgressive power to disrupt.” 47

For the surrealists, the primitive was but the external manifestation of a repressed subconscious, what Freud would call “the oceanic feeling,” unrestrained by reason, the real, by civilization. Surrealists owed an acknowledged and considerable debt to the emerging field of psychoanalysis, but Freud did not return the compliment: he disliked modern art in general, was “utterly indifferent” to fauvism and cubism, and regarded the surrealists as “complete fools.” 49 The provocative subtitle of Freud’s foundational text, Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics, established early a primitivist agenda for psychoanalysis. Freud takes his primitive examples almost entirely from Frazer’s Totemism and Exogamy (1910), but he radically transforms the discursive parameters of the primitive to include compulsion, ambivalence, impulse, obsessional neurosis, projection, and the Oedipus complex. Not to kill the totem animal and to avoid sexual intercourse with members of the opposite sex of the totem clan “must be,” Freud writes, “the oldest and most powerful of human desires.” 50 Taboos encode ambivalent psychic impulses “corresponding simultaneously to both a wish and a counter-wish,” and thus there exists a “psychological agreement between taboo and obsessional neurosis.” 51 The original taboo is to be found in the Oedipus complex, the metanarrative of incestuous fears and desires, which is “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art.” 52 Throughout his text, Freud oscillates between his conjectural “Prehistoric man” or “primal horde” and anthropological accounts of living peoples as if they were coeval, thus creating a “temporal uncoupling” (to use Greimas’s term) of the primitive and the primal, the contemporary and the prehistoric, in which the archaic and the modern bleed into each other until it becomes difficult to distinguish between times and places, the living and the dead. I have been arguing that primitivism misrepresents people’s actual social or political situation as colonial subjects in order to re dedicate them as primitive. Primitivism also deprives them of any kind of cultural specificity, or history, or place other than the most vague of generalizations: African, Negro, Bushman. Freud effectively accomplished the final translation of the
primitive: they are taken out of time. Time was no longer history, but a psychological event, and the real subject recedes ever further into an atemporal haze in which, to adapt a phrase of Sabine Hake’s, the primitive is repressed in order to construct a theory of repression.53

Primitive fever affected a wide spectrum of cultural life, high and low, from popular novels and empire expositions to avant-garde ballet. Tarzan of the Apes, which Edgar Rice Burroughs described as “a personification of the primitive man, the hunter, the warrior,”54 was a phenomenon spawning nearly twenty-five best-selling novels and fifty films in the two decades after its publication in 1912. So too, Stravinsky’s primitivist ballet, Le sacre du printemps (1913), was an immediate succès de scandale and the “rage of fashionable society.”55 Until the 1980s, primitivism was widely regarded as having achieved the goal set for it of reviving “belated” Western culture. This view could only be sustained, however, by an unquestioning acceptance of the aesthetic goals of high modernism, whose pursuit of the ideal of autonomous art paradoxically reinforced dominant ideologies and worldviews while claiming to transform them. The desire to relocate primitivism within a wider postcolonial critique centered on a major exhibition of modernist and primitive artworks at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984. This magnificent exhibition displayed works by Picasso, Braque, Emil Nolde, Amedeo Modigliani, Constantin Brancusi, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, the fauves, and Giacometti, alongside the Zuni, Inuit, Dogon, Baule, Dan, Yoruba, Fang, Kota, Kongo, and Oceanic artifacts that had inspired them.56 Yet the exhibition was greeted with widespread scorn and anger; the focus of discontent was the exhibition and catalogue’s subtitle, which encapsulated the curatorial assumptions informing the exhibition: “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. As became evident from the modern and tribal juxtapositions on show, “affinity” was an obfuscating fiction: “appropriation,” “plagiarism,” or even “theft” would have been better, more accurate epithets of the relationship between primitivism and the tribal.

Notes


15 Ibid., 53.

16 Ibid., 40.


20 Alois Riegl, quoted ibid., 40, 36.

21 Ibid., 17, 15.

22 Theodor Lipps, quoted ibid., 7, 123.

80
30 Roger Fry, quoted in Rhodes, “Burlington Primitive,” 103.
32 Ibid., 321.
36 Eliot, “Euripides and Professor Murray,” 68.
41 Spurr, “Myths of Anthropology,” 273.
42 Ibid., 275.
43 Ibid., 274.
47 Hal Foster, Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 200. See also Katharine Conley, “Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the ‘Automatic Message’ to André Breton’s Collection,” Yale French Studies,


51 Ibid., 35–36.

52 Ibid., 156.


