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THIRTEEN

Primitive

Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten

In assessing the "primitive" one should first note that the term does not constitute an essentialist category but exemplifies a relationship. The relation is one of contrast, of binary opposition to the "civilized": the term "primitive" cannot exist without its attendant opposite, and in fact the two terms act to constitute each other. Within the context of modernism, "primitivism" is an act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate features of the art and culture of peoples deemed "primitive" and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming Western art. In Western culture the term "primitive" has been applied with positive as well as negative valences, but when ascribed to cultures external to Europe its connotations have been predominantly negative. Above all we should think of the concept of the primitive as the product of the historical experience of the West and more specifically as an ideological construct of colonial conquest and exploitation. The ideological import of the "primitive" and of primitivism can be best grasped from the standpoint of a related set of oppositions mapped out in terms of time/space, gender, race, and class.

Time/Space

With regard to temporality the "primitive" is part of what Roland Barthes termed "mythic speech," for the label empties its referent of historical contingency and cultural specificity and instead subsumes it within an unchanging "nature." The condition of "timelessness" bestowed on the primitive also connotes the "primeval," for by not changing, the "primitive" is necessarily in opposition to all that does change or develop, namely, the "civilized." In the realm of art the temporal dimension of the primitive is most evident in the difference between the manner in which Western art historians have studied the products of their own culture and their analyses of the so-called primitive art of non-Western civilizations. Whereas Western art is described in terms of progression of stylistic developments or schools, each with a particular "master," non-Western art is frequently cast in what Sally Price, following Johannes Fabian, has called the "ethnographic present—a device that abstracts cultural expression from the flow of historical time and hence collapses individuals and whole generations into a composite figure alleged to represent his [*sic*] fellows past and present." For instance, whereas the cultural artifact *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is described as the creation of a particular artist, Pablo Picasso, and a work that marks the historical emergence of a new art movement, cubism,

the creators of the various African masks said to have influenced Picasso in his treatment of his chosen subject remain anonymous, known only by their "tribal" or regional affiliation. Failure to identify the individual creator of a mask is a way of denying that individual choices, including aesthetic ones, were a motivating factor in its production. No longer grounded in the historical specificity implied by categories of stylistic development or artistic biography, the mask becomes a free-floating signifier for the past, present, and future production of a given people, all of which remains unchanged. Such artifacts are said to express collective religious beliefs, and the creative contribution of an individual maker of masks remains an unasked question.

In Western discourse the distinction between collective and individual forms of expression in art production is part of a temporal progression from a "less-developed" condition, wherein cultural production is related to material needs of instinctual drives, to the state of "advanced" societies, in which the creative intellect gains ascendancy over the realm of the irrational. As Price notes, such assumptions led the critic René Huyghe to celebrate the geometricity of Oceanic art as a reflection of "the universal biological principle of the conservation of energy," for its producers were "instinctively imitating the ways of nature." Rather than attesting to the cultural sophistication of Oceanic culture, the production of geometric form is said to result from the nonhuman forces of nature, those "universal biological principles" that govern the "instinctive" activity of non-Western peoples. Temporally, this art is not viewed by Huyghe as the product of a society in a state of development or as evidence of the inventiveness of this people, but rather as the product of nature's forces, the temporal patterns of which are cyclical, repetitive, and thus unchanging. The art mirroring such phenomena is then itself unchanging, without history; similarly, Huyghe roots its producers in mythic conceptions attuned to the changing seasons or other natural forces.

To declare such art changeless and primeval is to deny what Fabian terms "coevalness," the temporal coexistence of the producer of "primitive" art with his or her Western counterpart. Despite the fact that a given piece of Oceanic sculpture may have been produced at a time contemporaneous with Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892), the denial of coevalness assures that the latter is designated modern while the former is deemed primitive. This dismissal of temporal proximity has aesthetic implications as well, for it is only Gauguin who is influenced, or—if we are to allow the concept of "influence" its agency—it is only Gauguin who is capable of converting the foreign artifact into a work of art. The "primitive" artist, supposedly governed by instinct rather than imagination, is incapable of registering a reciprocal influence. (The work of such scholars as Suzanne Preston Blier and James Clifford counters precisely this notion by studying the abundant instances of cross-fertilization between the West and non-European cultures from the fifteenth century to the present.) In this discourse the actuality of physical and temporal synchronicity

is replaced by a typological time frame defined in terms of Western progress and primitive regression. The spatial and temporal are frequently combined in such discourse, for to leave the West and enter into a foreign culture is to leave one's own "mature" culture and enter into an "infantile" past: African, Oceanic, or Islamic cultures are said to mirror the "childhood" of Western civilization. As such the term "primitive" is part of a larger discourse concerning the role of temporal constructs in power relations between cultures or between alternative modes of organizing human activity within a given society. Historians such as E. P. Thompson and anthropologists such as Frederick Cooper have noted that the imposition of temporal rhythms associated with industrial production onto the labor patterns of nonindustrial cultures, all in the name of progress, is one way in which capitalism asserts its hegemonic control over noncapitalist societies. The value judgments undergirding distinctions between the modern and the primitive then are part and parcel of the role of temporality in capitalist and colonial discourse.

At the same time, Western conceptions of the primitive could have positive valences, particularly when Western culture itself was thought to be "overly civilized" and thus in need of rejuvenation through contact with societies in an earlier stage of development. Within Europe proper, nineteenth-century social critics frequently bemoaned the shift of the rural peasantry to industrial towns for this very reason. Writers like John Ruskin saw the transferal of populations from country to city as a sign of the loss within Western culture of a preindustrial, and thus primitive, agrarian society whose communitarian values and religiosity contrasted sharply with the decadent effects of urbanism. Such value-laden assumptions animated an artist like Paul Gauguin, who regarded his move from metropolitan Paris to rural Brittany in the mid-1880s as a rediscovery of the uncorrupted, medieval roots of Western civilization. By casting Brittany in this mold he denied the temporal coevalness of Breton culture with that of Paris. Ironically, as Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock have shown, the distinctive Breton clothing Gauguin associated with a medieval past was in fact the nineteenth-century "flowering of Breton popular culture in costume . . . predicated on the emergence of a more leisured and prosperous section of the peasantry," who could afford such newly available trade items as embroidered cloth and lace. Similarly the farming practices in Brittany eulogized by Gauguin as preindustrial in images like his *Seaweed Gatherers* (1889) were a form of agro-industry fully adapted to the international market economy of Europe. The form and content of Gauguin's images of Brittany thus constituted a myth of the primitive divorced from the historical realities of the day.

Gender

Gender distinctions are also fundamental to notions of the primitive. In a seminal essay titled "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" the anthropologist Sherry Ortner drew upon Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in an

13.1 Paul Gauguin, *The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

analysis of the pervasive association of women with the natural or primitive. Since Ortner wrote this article in 1974, feminists in art history have drawn upon her findings to illuminate the primitivizing motivations behind representations of women by male artists of the early twentieth century. In this section we will periodically refer to such literature to underscore the art-historical implications of Ortner's study.

In her essay Ortner persuasively relates the second-class status of women in all societies to an association of women with the natural and men with the cultural sphere. As a result biological difference is imbued with power relations, in the Foucauldian sense, in which a superior male is pitted against an inferior female governed by "culturally defined value systems." The significance of power in the construction of gender difference is related by Ortner to the role of culture in the utilization of nature to meet human needs. Within this context women are associated with "something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence," namely "the givens of natural existence," before we subject this natural realm to cultural transformation. Despite the fact that distinctions between nature and culture

are themselves arbitrary, it is nevertheless true that viable relations between human existence and natural forces are dependent upon the regulation of the latter. Human culture therefore expresses our ability "to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by," nature. Gender enters into the "mastery" of nature through culture because women are traditionally viewed as closer to nature than men, who are considered the primary cultural arbiters in society. Although women obviously play a role in the cultural life of any society, they are nevertheless seen as "a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are." The primary reason for this bias is human biology: a woman's cultural functions are assumed to have a "natural" relation to her procreative capacity to bear children. The restriction of female activities to those that supposedly possess this natural relation does not impinge on men, whose physiology is not viewed as delimiting their capacities in the field of cultural production.

Art historians Marilyn Board, Carol Duncan, and Patricia Mathews have pointed to the gendered consequences of this construct with regard to theories of creativity. Writing about French symbolist criticism of the 1890s Mathews notes that mental instability among male artists was held to be a crucial component of their capacity to create, while female madness was said to differ in kind from that of men. Unlike their male counterparts, women could not channel their madness into creative activities, for their imaginative capacities were not harnessed and regulated by the intellect. Whereas the frenzied state of a male artist could result in mystical insight, mental transcendence of the material realm was totally inaccessible to a woman, whose madness was evidence of the overpowering of her mind by the base instincts and drives of her sexuality. Appropriately, madness among women was labeled "hysteria," a term whose etymological root in the Greek word for womb, *hysteron,* underscored its gendered origins. (This paradigm, as Sander Gilman has discussed, also operated to feminize marginalized males, such as Jews, through their presumed tendency to hysteria.) Duncan in turn charts the transformation of gendered notions of creativity in the early twentieth century, when creativity became associated with male virility rather than fin de siècle madness. As a result, male artists among the French fauvists and German expressionists linked their creative abilities to the sexual conquest of their female models, whose sexuality was the catalyst for the male artist's creativity. Once again, the ability to transcend nature through cultural production was restricted to the male domain, or men alone could transcend their sexual drives through the artistic act. As Duncan notes, such distinctions were urgently needed at a time when feminists were calling for an expanded role for women in a society that wished to restrict their activities to the domestic sphere, a realm supposedly closer to nature than to culture.

Such categorization and prejudgment of women as a genus in Western culture had profound consequences for the distinction within Europe between "primitive" and "modern" cultures and a more general differentiation between

Europe as a whole and the non-Western world. Within Europe proper, artists like Gauguin in his *Vision after the Sermon* contrasted rural Brittany with urban culture, deeming the former to be primitive by virtue of its spatial/temporal distance from an industrial "present" whose epicenter was Paris. Women predominate in Gauguin's representations of Brittany because that gender exemplified an instinctual level of experience, which Gauguin related to the naive religiosity of the Breton people. Non-Western cultures as a whole were in turn deemed closer to nature than to culture, with the result that—regardless of gender—the peoples of Africa, the so-called Orient, and Oceania were "feminized" in Western discourse. In texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), a whole series of binary oppositions resulted that served to define "otherness" in terms of sex as well as race. Literary historian Cleo McNelly [Kearns] has charted the gendered implications of these texts in her analysis of the paradigmatic language that would imbue the spatial/temporal journey from Europe proper to non-European cultures with a mythic "return" to the primitive condition. In fact artists such as Gauguin in his book *Noa Noa* (1897) or Emil Nolde in the account of his trip to New Guinea before World War I echo the primitivist tropes found in the writings of Conrad and Lévi-Strauss. Thus writings of artists, novelists, and anthropologists constitute a body of travel literature grounded in the language of primitivism.

Fundamental to such literature is a binary opposition between home and abroad, couched in terms of a journey from the realm of a civilization typified by order and ennui to a native culture synonymous with a fecund but chaotic and uncontrolled natural condition. In the gendered language of the travel account, the tropical forest—the archetype of fecundity—is invariably contrasted with the patriarchal technology of Western industry that threatens to violate the feminized "virgin land." For any Westerner who abhored this encounter, escape into the realm of the primitive was frequently cast as a quest for a mythical reunion of mind and body, intellect and instinct, which were supposedly torn asunder with the development of civilization. Thus Gauguin's decision to abandon Europe for Tahiti in the 1890s was motivated by a desire to rediscover his own sexual being and to escape the oppressive constraints Western culture purportedly imposed on his instinctual drives. The distinction between an overly intellectualized West and its instinctual counterpart resulted in further binary divisions: while one's civilized home was associated with the light of reason and an ability to understand through vision, the foreign other—what Conrad termed "the heart of darkness"—was associated with blackness, the tactile senses, and knowledge by way of feeling, "from within." On the scale of overarching generalizations, Western culture was deemed to be masculine and rational, while non-European cultures were categorized as feminine and instinctual. Within such discourses distinctions between European and non-Western men and women were also subjected to primitivist terminology. For

instance, in rhetoric that would separate white women at home from black women abroad, the contrast between civilized and savage was sexualized. In nineteenth-century travel literature male writers frequently identify the white women left at home with sexual sterility or motherly fidelity, describing their relations with their female counterparts as typified by friendship more than sensual desire. The dark-skinned women of Tahiti or Africa, on the other hand, are viewed as the very embodiment of sensuality, the natural women whose sexual energy mirrors that of the fecund forest surrounding them. Through sexual contact with the black woman, the European male seeks a redemptive union of mind and body unrealizable through contact with her European counterpart. In McNelly's words, "one of the key functions of this particular set of oppositions" is "to separate white women from black women, to insure that they relate only through men." This separation is exemplified in Gauguin's letters from Tahiti, wherein he casts his sexual adventures with the natives in the language of a redemptive return to a state of sensual innocence that his white wife could never bestow on him.

Such stereotypes were also operative in European images of Arab cultures in North Africa and the Middle East, which Europeans primitivized under the rubric "the Orient." In an essay drawing on Edward Said's text *Orientalism* (1978), Marilyn Board has charted the fauvist Henri Matisse's repetitive representation of the oriental "other" in the guise of the sensual, passive form of the female odalisque. "In the imagination of European scholars who defined it," states Board, "the Orient, like woman, came to signify an undiscriminating sensual paradise that constituted a revitalizing complement to Western man's divisive analytical compulsions." In his depiction of the oriental other, Matisse not only cast his European models in the role of odalisques in a harem, he abandoned the "analytical" method of single-vanishing-point perspective in favor of the flat, two-dimensional planarity and decorative patterning associated with Islamic carpets and wall tiles. Matisse's decorative vocabulary collapsed such diverse sources as Persian miniatures, Moroccan tapestries, and Moorish carpets into one "oriental" style, constructing an exotic environment in which an equally fantastic odalisque could be placed. In Board's words, Western cultures invariably represented the Orient as "inarticulate, enticing, and strange, constituting a passive cultural body to be controlled and acted upon by others." In short, the Orient was feminized as a passive cipher to be governed by an active (and superior) Western civilization.

By placing his European models in the sexualized terrain of the oriental odalisque, Matisse pointed to yet another paradigm within Western conceptions of the primitive: the association of the sexualized European woman with the racial "other." In the nineteenth century, both African women and European prostitutes were said to exhibit a natural tendency for sexual proclivity, and historian Sander L. Gilman notes that such sexual drives in European prostitutes indicated that their biology was inherently primitive, unlike that of their coun-

terparts among the middle and upper classes. To back up that claim, prostitutes were subjected to physiological classification in an attempt to define them as a breed apart from respectable European women. Gilman reveals that the physiognomic traits attributed to the prostitute were those associated with the African female, all of which pointed "to the 'primitive' nature of the prostitute's physiognomy." The logical conclusion of this chain of signifiers was that the sexual activity of the European prostitute was a sign of her physiological regression to the condition of the black female. The decision to become a prostitute was thus divorced from economic need and instead declared to be a direct result of degenerative, biological difference. In European art that difference was underscored by the juxtaposition, in images such as Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), of the black servant with the European prostitute, to indicate the sexual proclivity of the latter. By imposing such qualitative criteria on the prostitute, the middle and upper classes were able to divorce themselves from social responsibility for the prostitute's condition.

Outsider groups within Europe's borders, such as Gypsies and Jews, likewise fell into primitivist categories suggestive of mysterious social and religious practices and an exotic sensuality fully compatible with orientalist paradigms. For instance, D. H. Lawrence in his story "The Virgin and the Gipsy" (1930) casts the male Gypsy as a figure naturally and perfectly in harmony with his sexuality and with few of the cultural constraints that would interfere with his seduction of a hesitant, inhibited English girl. In Lawrence's narrative, the Gypsy's sexually charged encounter with this European virgin miraculously transforms her into a woman imbued with self-knowledge and freed from the crippling sexual hypocrisy of Edwardian culture as Lawrence viewed it. This literary construction has its feminine equivalent in Matisse's *The Gypsy* (1906), which depicts in violent colors a blowsy woman with large, loose features exaggeratedly inviting the presumed male viewer to sexual pleasure, conflating prostitute and Gypsy even more directly than the prostitute/African analyzed by Gilman.

Race

Just as a qualitative distinction was drawn between European women and the African "Hottentot Venus"—mediated by her sexualized counterpart in the form of the prostitute—so cultural and racial theorists on a more ambitious scale have drawn qualitative distinctions between Europeans and other "races." Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Christopher L. Miller have studied such attitudes previous to the earliest contact with inhabitants of other continents. In so doing they have highlighted the Eurocentric assumptions that Western explorers brought to their initial contacts with non-Western cultures. As Greenblatt discusses, according to his diary Columbus experienced the Caribbean Arawaks' *recognizing* his legal right to claim their island for Spain—despite its patent absurdity—because "I was not contradicted." Likewise explorers of the Enlightenment era, coming into contact with native inhabitants in

the New World, could feel that they were observing humans in a state of cultural "childhood," ready to be imprinted with the inevitable "process of civilization." The profundity of such convictions should not be underestimated in studying questions of racial and cultural difference.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau exemplifies the latter Enlightenment view in his trope of the "noble savage." Such a notion suggests that there is one humanity, broken up into peoples at differing stages within one civilizing process; the noble savage has yet to receive the necessary education and is thus a blank slate upon which civilization will be written. The "savage" or wild creature is noble because he or she, though unformed, possesses "natural" human feelings of gentleness and generosity (associated in Europe with the feudal nobility). It hardly needs pointing out that relations of aboriginals to European explorers—upon which reports Rousseau's idea was based—differed dramatically from those experienced later by European colonizers moving in to clear and farm aboriginal land, often with the use of slave labor. Theories based on racial essence, such as "ethnologist" Joseph de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55), played an important role in the colonizing process, since post-Darwinian biological determinism justified institutionalizing categories of difference and simultaneously "explained" Europe's imperialist successes. Such nineteenth-century racial theories did much to displace Rousseau's Enlightenment trope of the noble savage—suggestive of an early stage of evolutionary development leading to the higher stage of European civilization—with a trope of fixed biological limitation suggestive of the subhuman. Both tropes define the native as "other" in a system founded on the European as a cultural norm.

Though notions of the primitiveness of other peoples have been important to virtually every historical culture, a special relation of power pertains to such notions when they are linked to imperial domination. The twentieth century, especially after the Second World War, has seen the end of the "Colonial Era"—though, significantly, not an end to Western economic domination over the "third world"—which has enabled the emergence of a postcolonial critique of primitivism currently agitating both academic and political discourse. In taking over a land to exploit the labor of its peoples and its natural resources, there is a clear economic and political advantage to viewing those people as savage, simple, and inferior—in a word, primitive—since it then seems justifiable not to share with them the products of their land and labor. Such assumptions are culturally shared rather than cynically concocted (though there is certainly evidence of the latter as well); hence sincerity is not the issue, but rather how the colonizers construct the native within preconceived categories of the human/subhuman and how this form of racism continues to play a role in our contemporary "global village."

The era of exploration beginning in the fifteenth century resulted by the seventeenth century in European colonization of previously uncharted lands, displacement or enslavement of native peoples, international trade in African

slaves, and a transformed economy in Europe based on such labor and its products. Local slavery among Africans and larger-scale slavery by Arabs already existed in Africa, and European marketing of African slaves resulted in the expansion of that trade to a global scale. Throughout the eighteenth century, wealth flowed to Europe from American tobacco plantations, Caribbean sugar plantations, and Indian tea plantations; by the end of the nineteenth century—with the last scramble for colonies in Africa—virtually the entire non-European world was colonized, and World War I was fought in no small part because of Kaiser Wilhelm's anger that Germany had the smallest part of the pie. With the rise of the great empires of modern Europe—Portuguese, Spanish, British, Ottoman, French—military and economic domination of the weak by the strong seemed the natural order. It seemed natural because those so dominated were viewed as incapable of properly exploiting their own resources or as undergoing a necessary "civilizing" process. Thus colonial discourse imposed conceptions of the "primitive" on native populations, which every interaction confirmed to the colonial mind.

Such attitudes by no means meant taking native cultures for granted. An enormous amount of ethnographic fascination with the conquered peoples exercised itself during the colonial period, coinciding with modern, primitivist art. (That it also coincided with the birth of the field of anthropology has led to much self-reflection in that discipline in recent years.) Missionaries and government officials collected quantities of information on local habits, all tending to support a view of native practices as irrational, instinctual, superstitious, animistic, and often bloodthirsty. For instance, such reports accompanied the French government's colonial displays in the Universal Expositions at the turn of the century as part of a series of exhaustive books on the economy of each of France's colonies, where they function to support the "civilizing mission" of Christianization and work discipline imposed by the rulers. Thus some early ethnography specifically supported French government policies, which varied between differing colonies of the Far East, West and Central Africa and the Caribbean.

The attitudes encoded in such publications help define the paradigms evident in both verbal and visual representations of the racial other and reveal the same two fundamental tropes. The range of colonial debate swung between two poles: (1) Enlightenment principles evoking an image of the black as noble savage, in a state out of which whites had long ago evolved and which could be addressed by assimilation into a superior culture; and (2) racial theory evoking an image of the black as unregenerate and barbaric savage, which subhuman condition could be mitigated through control of a superior culture but could not be altogether suppressed. The former attitude is visible in the General Act of the Berlin Conference on African colonization of 1885: "All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in these territories pledge themselves to watch over the preservation of the native populations and the improvement of their moral and material conditions of existence, and to work together for the

suppression of slavery and of the slave trade." Here natives deserve and are capable of "improvement" of their moral condition, that is, they can become "like us." In 1898 King Leopold of Belgium, a signatory to this act, expressed his interpretation of its Enlightenment language, however, in the essentialist terms of racial theory:

> The mission which the agents of the State have to accomplish on the Congo is a noble one. They have to continue the development of civilization in the center of Equatorial Africa, receiving their inspiration directly from Berlin and Brussels. Placed face to face with primitive barbarism, grappling with sanguinary customs that date back thousands of years, they are obliged to reduce these gradually. They must accustom the population to general laws, of which the most needful and the most salutary is assuredly that of work.

Here natives are primitive, barbaric, and bloodthirsty, which features are virtually timeless, i.e., of their essence; Europeans must impose work discipline upon them gradually in order to "reduce," but not entirely eliminate, this character. Racial theory posits an absolute divide between developing racial geneologies: the European in a state of progressive development and the African in a state of degeneration, representing a false start of the human race. For Gobineau the African race does have the virtue of untrammeled creativity, which most overrefined Europeans have lost, but not the intellectual capacity to turn this creative flow into true art or music; that is, their creativity remains at the level of instinct and fails again to rise to fully human levels.

Turn-of-the-century avant-garde artists and their primitivist aesthetic maneuvers operated in and against this colonial world, whose missionaries, merchants, and administrators were responsible for bringing to Europe the art of native peoples. The modernists' aim was to critique the social and aesthetic order—in the case of the visual arts, state-sanctioned academicism—by embracing an imagined primitiveness whose authenticity they opposed to a "decadent" West, an attitude steeped in the Enlightenment tradition. For them, Islamic, Oceanic, and African art offered visual models of simplification and ornament representing authentic primitive expressions of thought and feeling. This attitude could even inform Gauguin's embrace of cultures like the Japanese, Javanese, and Egyptian, where denial of their historicity and cultural traditions could not be maintained. Such artists wanted to transform Western artistic traditions—and the social order in which they were implicated—by celebrating an elemental return to those imagined primitive states whose suppression they viewed as having cut off a necessary vitality. In this operation the artists themselves became the "primitives," in opposition to the "moribund" civilization they defined themselves against.

At the same time, modernists could both participate in and be sharply critical of colonial racial attitudes, variously exhibiting shared attitudes with the dominant

culture they opposed. With Africa, for example, far from extending their social criticism to a critique of the reductive view of Africans promoted by European governments for colonial justification, modernists such as Conrad, Picasso, and the dadaist Marcel Janco embraced a deeply romanticized view of African art as the expression of humans in a precivilized state. By associating such art with the worshiping of idols and enactment of violent rituals, these modernists were as willing as any colonial agent to mystify African culture. Such Africanist works as Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or Janco's masks and sound-poem performances (1916) implicitly reject the trope of the noble savage by pointedly reveling in ethnic difference and attempting to draw power from an imagined tribal life and art that were irrational, magic, and violent, that is, by embracing precisely the symptoms of its degeneracy according to racial theory. Appropriately, early texts celebrating modernism, such as Gelett Burgess's "The Wild Men of Paris" (*Architectural Record,* 1910), highlighted the interest of André Derain or Picasso in African art to underscore their supposed primitive transformation. Modernists thus subverted Gobineau's theory of creativity by celebrating rather than deploring its reductive formulation and presented themselves as tapping into comparably deep and mystical sources for their own art.

Their subversion was especially offensive to the dominant culture because these artists valorized African sculpture as their aesthetic model. As Frances Connelly has demonstrated, French artists as far back as the sixteenth century connected concepts of the "grotesque" in two dimensions with caricature, ornament, and the fantastical, while the grotesque in three dimensions was associated with the monstrous and the horrific and was specifically linked to Africa. African sculptures, especially, were viewed as "idols" and "fetishes," representing to Europeans manifestations of the irrational, animistic, and frightening world in which they imagined the "primitive" to live. Conversion to Christianity routinely involved destruction (or exportation) of such too-powerful three-dimensional art, and the shock felt by eighteenth-century Europeans gradually took on shades of sarcasm and contempt as colonialization advanced. In embracing such art, the modernists sought to subvert colonial stereotypes, but their subversive revisions necessarily remained implicated in the prejudices from which they derived, so that they now appear no less stereotypical and reductive than the racist caricatures they opposed.

According to Patricia Leighten, primitivism among the modernists also sometimes expressed an artist's political concern with the plight of exploited and oppressed native populations, as with Picasso and his circle during the French Congo scandals of 1905–07 or Gauguin's alarm over the destruction of Tahitian religion and cultural life. Primitivism was thus much more than a method for revolutionizing style, since such formal radicalism simultaneously served to present an alternative to currently entrenched social and aesthetic forms, mingling concepts of authenticity, spontaneity, and freedom from the repression of bourgeois social, aesthetic, and moral constraints as well as politi-

cal oppression. The primitivism of such artists as Picasso, Matisse, and Derain, like that of Gauguin before them, thus gestured toward cultures whose transformative powers they admiringly offered as escape routes from the stultification of French culture and academic art, inspiring purposely or not the heated contempt of politically and culturally conservative art critics. Such primitivism focuses colonial issues tellingly, revealing the complex and ambivalent relations of modernity to issues of race agitating the modernists' own culture. We could equally consider such paradigms in other reaches of twentieth-century art, looking at the relations of, for example, the surrealists to makers of Easter Island and other Oceanic sculpture, the abstract expressionists to native North American artists, or performance artists of the last three decades to rituals of prehistoric peoples.

Class

Issues of social class likewise play a role in these pairs of binary opposites, constituting another category of "high" and "low," "us" and "them." According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their essay "Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnivalesque," bourgeois suppression of what Mikhail Bakhtin termed the carnivalesque and its projection onto the "other" of behaviors increasingly taboo for the middle class reinforced stereotypes of racial and class difference. They note that even as late as the nineteenth century carnival ritual involved most classes and that the disengagement of the middle class was slow and uneven, entailing "a gradual reconstruction of the idea of carnival as the culture of the Other," specifically the lower classes. Reacting against this bourgeois attempt to "preserve a stable and 'correct' sense of self," bohemians "took over in displaced form much of the inversion, grotesque body symbolism, festive ambivalence and transgression which had once been the provenance of carnival," whose forms, symbols, rituals, and structures are "among the fundamental elements in the aesthetics of modernism." They add that a significant aspect of this was a "compensatory plundering of ethnographic material—masks, rituals, symbols—from colonized cultures." Thus modernists, by embracing what the middle class marked out as "low" and "internalized under the sign of negation and disgust," present a mirror image of that repression by celebrating the very symptoms of bourgeois phobia.

Far from requiring a colonial other, modernists could as easily accommodate rural and urban peasants to primitivist categories of authenticity and outsiderhood, looking to folk art of the rural peasantry or popular art of the urban working class to lend greater authenticity to their own expressions of artistic and social criticism. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Gustave Courbet evoked the anonymous and crudely folkish woodcuts known as *images d'Epinal* in his art, suggesting a complex of allusions that ranged from his elevation of peasant subject matter (genre painting raised to the scale of history painting) to the exaggeratedly signified spontaneity of his formal expression. The art of

such modernists as Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Georges Seurat, on the other hand, was profoundly informed by the cartoons that contemporaneously proliferated in Paris. Paralleling the anonymous status of African sculptors, such satirical graphics—though often signed by individuals—were consumed as popular urban "folk" art in a city whose industrial outskirts doubled in population between 1871 and 1914 through an influx of displaced, and rapidly proletarianized, peasants. Modernist artists appropriated the "spontaneity" and "crudity" of urban working-class culture both in style and in their evocation of the cafés-concerts, nightclubs, bars, and cafés where workers and déclassé bohemians gathered after hours. Such primitivism firmly rejects the academic styles and subjects embraced by and servicing the bourgeoisie.

The admiration of rural folk art was equally central to turn-of-the-century modernists from Gauguin and the Nabis to Vassily Kandinsky and other members of the German expressionist movement. Imitating the primary colors and simplified forms of folk art, such artists asserted the superiority of an imagined folk simplicity of spirit and unity with nature that expressed a longing on their part to escape the complication of urban industrialized middle-class life. Such romanticization of peasant life could extend, for an artist like Emil Nolde, to sympathy with the racial theories of the National Socialists, which added a biological dimension to worship of the "folk." Such theories, which have been rife throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embrace the virtues of ethnic purity and see a spiritual essence in race that they hope will revitalize their particular culture as a whole. In this model, the Teutonic peasant becomes the noble savage and the Jew and Gypsy the degenerate subhuman, a biological model now internal to Europe's borders. As Sander Gilman notes, the Jew in nineteenth-century scientific discourse was said to have emerged from Africa, with the result that Jews shared the African's "natural" susceptibility to syphilis and other "degenerative" diseases. That such ideas led to the genocide of Jews and Gypsies during World War II and continue among neo-Nazi groups in Europe and white supremacists in North America reveals the political danger of racial theory at the other end of the primitivist spectrum.

The term "primitive" then is an inescapably political category, whether used admiringly or pejoratively. Though attitudes of racial superiority based on ethnic and cultural difference have been operative throughout history, the colonial period beginning with Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas focuses the question firmly on the issue of power. As we have shown, the concept of the primitive engages issues of time and space, gender, race, and class in thoroughly inseparable ways, though we have tried to treat these issues distinctly here for purposes of clarification. Although the majority of work on such questions has been done in the fields of anthropology, history, literary criticism, and cultural studies, the ways these social and intellectual structures operate both consciously and unconsciously in artistic culture is an increasing preoccupation in the field of art history.

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