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| Primitivism |
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| Primitivism in modern art designates a range of practices and accompanying modes of thought that span the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century and cut across manifold artistic styles and groups. This entry presents instances of primitivism from this period that are representative of its features. Modern artistic primitivism refers, above all, to the ways in which Western artists valorised and drew upon aspects of so-called primitive art and cultures in their works, ideas, and lifestyles. They employed selective formal and thematic elements that they believed were characteristic of the arts and cultures of not only small-scale, native, non-Western peoples, but also of larger-scale, more highly organised non-Western societies, Western pre-Renaissance and non-classical styles, and European vernacular means of expression. |
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Even more frequently, these artists freely intermixed such elements and invented others that suited their conceptions of the ‘primitive’, generating hybrid forms and cultural features. Primitivism was developed from mythology, philosophy, travel writings, ethnography, literature, racial and cultural theory, popular culture, and colonial propaganda. It was also generated by encounters with artifacts and peoples in modern display venues, such as museums and world’s fairs, and during travels. Modern artists carried out primitivist practices as ways to oppose academic techniques and principles and the cultural category of the ‘civilised’, with which the concept of and visual attributes considered ‘primitive’ necessarily coexist. Modern artistic primitivism had a number of further interlinked purposes: cultural rejuvenation, formal invention, the pursuit of greater expressiveness, as well as bohemian and political provocation; it was also used as currency in personal and artistic rivalries. Not least, it served the production of identity in relation to others, as part of appropriative exercises of power, and to oppose Western modernity and processes of modernisation. It should be made clear that the category and traits considered ‘primitive’—including primordial, natural, naïve, crude, expressive, sensual, decorative, as well as associated with vernacular craft and not fine art—are ones that describe the beliefs of the practitioners of primitivism and not the cultures and objects to which these traits were attributed.  Primitivism was bound up with a network of colonial, imperial, and scholarly interests, and its practitioners often partook of racist, misogynist, and stereotypical views of so-called primitive peoples. Nevertheless, primitivism possessed powerful critical capacities and was a method of grappling with modernity’s contradictions: one the one hand, its possibilities for personal freedom, lack of absolute stylistic norms, and access to the cultures of others, and, on the other, its relentless destruction of stable values and social forms, contingency, abstraction, and commodification of all aspects of life. Primitivism’s Philosophical and Theoretical Background Modern artistic primitivism drew from an extensive and complex history of primitivist thinking in Western culture, from antiquity, to the primitivist modes of thought developed in relation to the travel literature and anthropological theory of the ‘Age of Discovery’ and the Enlightenment, to nineteenth-century exoticism and Orientalism. Previously, ancient philosophers supposed that there existed both earlier and contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples who lived in harmony with nature and their own impulses, as well as more ‘savage’ ‘primitive’ peoples who were able to bear hardship and had few possessions (so-called ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ primitivisms, respectively).  In the early modern period, a number of notions of the ‘primitive’ were formed in relation to the Western classical tradition governing European art academies, as Frances Connelly has shown. Thus because classical and academic ideals and techniques were associated with the powers of intellectual reflection, ‘primitive’ peoples and their artifacts were thought to demonstrate enthrallment in sense experience. Moreover, conceptions of ‘primitive’ artistic production became intertwined with ideas of decorative inventiveness. Primitivism was also nourished by Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers’ preoccupation with the origins of cultural institutions and human faculties, as well as by Romantic notions of culture that valued cultures in their supposedly early states.  The fundamental notion that ‘primitive’ peoples animate the external world while modern scientific thought is capable of identifying physical forces at the basis of its functioning is an important modern idea about the ‘primitive’. This is also a conceptual division that generates modernity’s subject-object relationships. In the twentieth century, the self-aware modern subject understands itself as distinct from nature and material objects in the world, while spiritual beliefs, representations, and other notions of connections between humans and the physical world are relegated to the spheres of imagination, superstition, and culture. The Primitive in Art and Design Theory and Mass Culture, circa 1850–1930 Nineteenth-century decorative arts reform laid important foundations for primitivism in modern art. In his book *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which gathered and illustrated examples of proper design principles from a range of ‘savage’ to historical cultures, the designer and reformer Owen Jones (1809–1874) wrote that the urge to ornament was a primordial one and that modern artists should recover pure design instincts. This was a response to industrial developments that made possible the production of highly ornamented but often poor-quality objects in popular historical styles and in new, highly naturalistic ones. These material and technological shifts occurred in conjunction with the rise of colonialism’s cultures of collecting and display and nationalist inter-European design competition. These were important conditions for the discovery and embrace of ‘primitive’ arts.  File: Jones\_GrammarofOrnament.png  Figure 1 Illustration to Jones, Grammar of Ornament, 1856.  Source: online from digital library of Smithsonian Libraries here: <http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/grammarornament00jone>. According to information at this page, this work is not in copyright.  File: Semper\_illustration.jpg  Figure 2 Illustration to Semper, Style, 1861-1863.  Source: National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, D.C. Their copy: Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder, Praktische Aesthetik : ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde von Gottfried Semper*, 2 vols., Munich: Druck v. Gebrüder Obpacher, 18--, Plate 11. This is the item in their online catalog: <https://library.nga.gov/mercury/holdingsInfo?searchId=11&recPointer=1&recCount=20>.  Artists practicing primitivism around 1900 also drew from German-language art theory’s intense interest in artistic origins. Gottfried Semper’s (1803–1879) 1861–1863 *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* initiated a scholarly turn toward the origins of minor art forms, considered ‘fossils’ of early cultures, in order to counter historicism in design. While historicist nineteenth-century design was criticised for industrially reproducing a range of earlier and exotic styles in art, architecture, and everyday objects, Semper’s study of early forms offered a means of remaining true to design principles considered fundamental and universal. In addition, Semper’s writing on jewelry moved freely between ancient civilizations and contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples, locating original principles of ornamental order in such adornment.  Alois Riegl’s (1858–1905) 1890/1893 theorization of primordial artists driven by an artistic will to produce non-instrumental, decorative forms was conceived in the context of a debate about the origins of prehistoric and ‘primitive’ ornament. In this debate, currently living so-called primitive peoples were considered remnants of or analogous to early or prehistoric cultures, and their arts and cultures were deployed as evidence of fundamental principles. Hence they were thought to provide a picture of humanity’s childhood (just as children were believed to recapitulate humanity’s developmental stages).  File: Riegel\_illustration.jpg  Figure 3 Illustration to Riegl, Problems of Style, 1893.  Source: : <https://archive.org/details/stilfragengrundl00rieguoft>. See library and copyright info. This text was scanned and uploaded by the University of Toronto Library, as it states on this page.  Recently discovered prehistoric art—naturalistic Paleolithic and ‘geometric’ Neolithic styles—seemed to indicate that the naturalistic and abstract were two contradictory transhistorical modes. Many theorists argued that the former’s naturalism appeared prior to the development of religious life and basic forms of conceptualization, while the latter’s abstract forms were ‘conceptual’ depictions of mental images. This material was harnessed in a widespread discourse on artistic psychology and its changing visual manifestations. Wilhelm Worringer’s (1881–1965) 1907 *Abstraction and Empathy* developed the notion of a ‘primitive’ urge to abstraction as fearful response to phenomenal flux, which resonated with emerging forms of modernist abstraction.  File: Worringer\_illustration.jpg  Figure 4 Illustration to Worringer, Form in Gothic, 1912.  Source: <https://archive.org/details/formproblemederg00worruoft>. Here it says that the book is not in copyright. This text was scanned and uploaded by the University of Toronto Library, as it states on this page.  File: Warburg\_Images.jpg  Figure 5 Illustration to Warburg, ‘Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America’, 1895/1923.  Source: scan from: Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,1995, Fig. 1, p. 3.  The Warburg Archive at the Warburg Library can give permission to publish this or not. I have only seen images from this text used with permission of the Warburg Archive and Library. You can contact them here: <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/home/staff-contacts/archive/>.  caption in Cornell U. book: Fig. 1. Serpent as lightning. Reproduction of an altar floor, kiva ornamentation’.  In contrast to this preoccupation with the principles of ‘primitive’ ornament and design on the part of many thinkers, art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) sought to understand relationships between man, nature, and the cosmos in his (1895/1923) study of native cultures of the American Southwest. Thereby, his work also imbued ‘primitive’ symbols and rituals, such as visual and architectural representations of the cosmos and ceremonial dances, with significance. However, he also interpreted contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples as ‘survivals’ (or vestiges), however ruined, of early humanity. In this way, they were thought to embody traits common to cultures at the beginning of a continuum from pagan or ‘primitive’ to modern society. This point speaks to the fundamentally ‘allochronic’ nature of primitivist discourses (in anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s words), which posit that living ‘primitive’ peoples exist outside of progressive, historical time and are not ‘coeval’ with modern Western societies.  In response to such literature premised on the non-contemporaneity of so-called primitive peoples, anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) developed alternative theories of the ‘primitive’ in hisbook *Primitive Art* (1927). In this book,he considers elements common to ‘primitive’ and other arts in a non-progressive frame of analysis. Having established the contemporaneity and equal mental and technical capacities of so-called primitive peoples, he viewed their arts as emerging in relationship to social and geographical circumstances and to particular materials and techniques.  File: Boas\_illustration.jpg  Figure 6 Illustration to Boas, Primitive Art, 1927.  Source: scanned from: Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, New York, Dover Publications, 1955, Plate I (after page 18). Reprint of 1927 edition by H. Aschehoug & Co. Oslo.  This is probably not under copyright. It is available online here: <https://archive.org/details/primitiveart00boas_im4>  Caption under image in book: 'Maidu Baskets. 1–2 Butterfly design  3. Raccoon design 4. Rim: mountains; body: flying geese 5. Moth-miller’.  The study of ‘primitive’ art by such scholars as discussed above provided extra-historical ‘beginnings’ for many disciplines, including art history, which were in the process of institutionalization around the turn of the twentieth century. In addition, the popular primitivism that permeated Western European metropolises around 1900 was equally important to the development of primitivism as this scholarly interest in the ‘primitive’. Freak shows, circuses, world’s fairs, and other mass-cultural venues displayed ‘primitive’ peoples and artifacts, and artists drew as much from these representations as they did from ethnographic museums and scholarly and other literature. These scholarly and popular approaches to the ‘primitive’ combined with racial and cultural theories of this period that buttressed colonialism and concomitant forms of class and gender oppression to form modern artistic primitivism. Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism Embracing simplified, popular, naïve, even crude formal qualities and cultural references that defied academic artistic training and values was critical to the styles and personas of modern artists beginning with Realist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) and proto-Impressionist Edouard Manet (1832–1883). Their ally, the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), described the childlike, sickly, and intoxicated characteristics of the ‘painter of modern life’, necessary counterparts to his urbane sophistication. The former rendered him especially sensitive to stimuli of the urban environment, able to see the world always anew.    Critics and artists connected with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, such as Émile Zola (1840–1902), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), and Maurice Denis (1870–1943), posited a modern artist whose sensorium directly interfaced with the phenomenal world, bypassing forms of historical mediation and trained imitation. This artist’s style was intentionally awkward, aiming to produce art directly from his unique temperament and nature. These works were distorted, and had unfinished qualities, relative to academic painting. These retrogressive formal and rhetorical techniques were decisive for modernist primitivist artists.  Critic Roger Fry’s (1866-1934) notion of Post-Impressionism propagated a view that highlighted the immediacy of artistic imaginative life. He suggested it was more sensually receptive than the habitual operations of instrumental thought and asserted the necessity of unlearning the goal-oriented deployment of the senses to achieve artistic sincerity. He combined these ideas with theories of ‘primitive’ and children’s art, furthering the common notion that ‘primitive’ peoples exemplified humanity’s early stages and children reiterated its development.  File: Fry\_illustration.jpg  Figure 7 Illustration to Fry, ‘Children’s Art’, 1917.  Source: : <https://archive.org/details/burlingtonmagazi30londuoft>. This text was scanned and uploaded by the University of Toronto Library, as it states on this page.  This is probably not under copyright, but I am not sure. It has been republished in the *Roger Fry Reader* and elsewhere. Paul Gauguin, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism The work and life of Symbolist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) are often the starting point of analyses of modernist primitivism, as they can be considered primitivist formally and in terms of subject matter and lifestyle. Just as Symbolist art scorned the material, contemporary world and history, Gauguin’s art was decorative and abstracted, seeking the ideal. He and fellow Post-Impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) plotted their flight from decadent European culture focusing their fantasies on the South Seas. Their knowledge of exoticist and colonial literature, art, and popular culture led them to believe they would find respite from capitalist production and ownership structures there, a ‘primitive’ land of natural abundance, offering erotic delights and artistic freedom.  Gauguin and similarly disposed artists had already sought ‘primitive’ culture in Brittany, France, in the late 1880s. In denial of the modernization of Brittany’s agriculture and the touristic re-invention of its culture, Gauguin convinced himself that he discovered ‘savage’ ways of life in the seemingly unchanged dress and rituals of the Breton people and the region’s rural landscape. He continued this quest in Tahiti beginning in 1890. However, in a pattern to be repeated by later artists, he found this imagined ‘primitive’ culture already endangered by European encroachment upon his arrival. In his Tahitian works, Gauguin’s primitivism was syncretic, his references not only to the art and myths of the South Seas, but also pre-Renaissance Europe, the Far East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.  File: Gauguin\_TheYellowChrist.jpg  Figure 8 Gauguin, The Yellow Christ, 1889.  Source: owner, Albright Knox Gallery: <http://www.albrightknox.org/collection/collection-highlights/piece:gauguin-yellow-christ/>  [[image source: ArtStor Repository: Albright-Knox Art Gallery Collection: Art, Archaeology and Architecture (Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives) ID Number: 40-12-06/ 9 Source: Image and original data provided by Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y. Source: http://www.artres.com/c/htm/Home.aspx Source: http://www.artres.com/c/htm/TreePfLight.aspx?ID=LES Rights: Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ART RESOURCE, N.Y. Rights: Please note that if this image is under copyright, you may need to contact one or more copyright owners for any use that is not permitted under the ARTstor Terms and Conditions of Use or not otherwise permitted by law. While ARTstor tries to update contact information, it cannot guarantee that such information is always accurate. Determining whether those permissions are necessary, and obtaining such permissions, is your sole responsibility.]]  File: Gauguin\_WhereDoWeComeFrom.jpg  Figure 9 Gauguin, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? 1897.  Source: owner, Museum of Fine Arts Boston: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/where-do-we-come-from-what-are-we-where-are-we-going-32558>. See below about contacting for rights.  [[image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Paul Gauguin Creator: French, 1848-1903, European; French Title: Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? Work Type: Paintings Date: 1897 Material: Oil on canvas Measurements: 139.1 x 374.6 cm (54 3/4 x 147 1/2 in.) Description: Full View Repository: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Repository: Boston, Massachusetts, USA Repository: Tompkins Collection Repository: 36.270 Repository: http://www.mfa.org/ Collection: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Collection Collection: Formerly in The AMICO Library ID Number: BMFA.36.270 Source: Data From: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Rights: This image was provided by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Contact information: Debra LaKind, Head of Rights & Licensing, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, (617) 369-4386 (ph), (617) 369-4340 (fax), dlakind@mfa.org. Rights: Please note that if this image is under copyright, you may need to contact one or more copyright owners for any use that is not permitted under the ARTstor Terms and Conditions of Use or not otherwise permitted by law. While ARTstor tries to update contact information, it cannot guarantee that such information is always accurate. Determining whether those permissions are necessary, and obtaining such permissions, is your sole responsibility.]]  Gauguin’s primitivism was partly a vehicle for sexual and racial fantasies. In Tahiti, he sought to bolster his masculinity through his relationships to young native women. His works often depicted these women alongside children, and represented key primitivist elements: the feminine and the childlike, which were identified with the historically and culturally early. Gauguin’s carrying out of his primitivism and formal radicalism on female bodies was a strategy common to modernist and avant-garde artistic innovation.  However, Gauguin’s works also powerfully critiqued European culture (as the scholar Stephen Eisenman has shown). Many of his works astutely represent alternative Polynesian relationships between natural, human, and other spheres, and give form to non-Western forms of beauty and poise. By means of these works, he dreamed—however naively—of worlds outside of capitalist forms of exploitation. During his later time in Tahiti, he participated in anti-colonial resistance groups and engaged with alternative native cultures. Worpswede In the 1890s and early 1900s, similar attempts to retreat from urban culture took place in artists’ communities in Germany, for example, among the Worpswede group. In recently unified Germany (as of 1871), modernization took place later and more rapidly than in other Western European countries, inspiring great anxiety and the development of both progressive internationalisms and nationalistic and reactionary cultural criticism fixated on relationships to nature and to peasant culture. Theorists like Georg Simmel (1858-1918) examined modern, urban psychology and its differences from that of traditional, rural communities. Many Worpswede artists worked in realist or Symbolist-influenced styles, but the work of Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) was allied with Post-Impressionist techniques, also partaking of the idealization of peasants, the feminine, and the natural. These artists’ works focused on the rural landscape and the local peasantry, and their rustic themes and lifestyles contributed to contemporary idealisations of the German character and its closeness to nature.  File: Modersohn-Becker\_KneelingMotherandChild.jpg  Figure 10 Modersohn-Becker, Kneeling Mother and Child, 1907.  Source: Seems to be owned by the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, according to everything I’ve found: <http://artnews.org/k20/?exi=30969>  Wikiart says the image is in the public domain, but I am not sure.  <http://www.wikiart.org/en/paula-modersohn-becker/kneeling-breast-feeding-mother>  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Modersohn-Becker, Paula, 1876-1907 Title: Kneeling Mother & Child Date: 1907 Material: oil on canvas Measurements: 113x74cm Subject: Painting--Germany--20th C. A.D Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego Die Brücke, German Expressionism, and Dada The artists of Die Brücke (‘the bridge’) in Dresden, Germany practiced primitivism in their Nietzschean quest to harmonize art and life and to regenerate culture, beginning around 1905. This group of artists included Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Max Pechstein (1881–1955), Erich Heckel (1880–1970), Emile Nolde (1867–1956), Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966), and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (1884–1976). The group’s primitivism emerged from its members’ immersion in the debates of the Jugendstil decorative arts reform movement (the German branch of pan-European Art Nouveau) at the turn of the twentieth century. In that context, ‘early’ non-European arts and Western pre-Renaissance styles were positively regarded for their usefulness in dismantling historicism, academic art, and realism. Die Brücke artists believed that ‘primitive’ peoples instinctively developed artistic styles and symbols appropriate to their cultures that expressed their relationships to the world. These authentic styles seemed to them to be embodied especially in ‘primitive’ decorative everyday and religious objects. In contrast, modern culture lacked such forms and instead imitated past styles, leading to the production of art and craft objects that lacked vitality. Along these lines, Die Brücke sought communal art forms and non-commodified interactions between makers and consumers of objects.  File: Kirchner\_studio\_photograph2.jpg  Figure 11 Kirchner, photograph of studio, c. 1911.  Source: This image is published in Jill Lloyd’s book, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (Yale, 1991), page 10. According to the book, this image is from ‘Photo archive H. Bolliger and R. N. Ketterer, Campione d’Italia’.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig, 1880-1938 Title: Photo: Artist w/Wife, Erna in Berlin Studio Subject: Painting--Germany--19th C. A.D Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego  Just as ‘primitive’ arts seemed to exhibit unalienated work processes, direct relationships to materials, and great expressiveness, Die Brücke artists were drawn to mediums with ‘primitive’ connotations, like crafts, woodcarving, and woodcuts. Moreover, they extended Jugendstil’s efforts to provoke spontaneous responses to nature and to infuse objects with spirit by pursuing immediacy in their bohemian lifestyles, as well as in their art.  Photographs staged in Die Brücke’s communal studio environments evidence their lived primitivism. These studio environments include wall paintings, curtains, and homemade furniture inspired by Palau decorative arts, Ajanta cave paintings, and Indian temple sculpture, among other sources. Moreover, Die Brücke’s primitivism was carried out in both urban and countryside locales. On the one hand, in the circus and cabaret images that Die Brücke produced around 1910, urban entertainment is intertwined with the interest in ‘primitive’ culture and lifestyles. Such popular entertainment venues regularly made use of exotic themes and peoples, and the energetic figure of the cabaret dancer linked the ‘primitive’ and the modern in Die Brücke’s works, as the scholar Jill Lloyd writes. On the other hand, their works depicting excursions to the countryside were produced in the context of German reform movements that sought remedies for the negative effects of urban life, advocating a return to nature.  File: Kirchner\_BathersThrowingReeds.jpg  Figure 12 Kirchner, Bathers Throwing Reeds, 1909  Source: owner, Museum of Modern Art: <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/64663?locale=en> (there should be multiple owners as this is a print) image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig, 1880-1938 Title: Bathers Tossing Roads Date: 1910 Material: color woodcut Measurements: h.20x29cm Subject: Prints--Germany--20th C. A.D Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego  File: Kirchner\_AcrobaticDance.jpg  Figure 13 Kirchner, Acrobatic Dance, 1911.  Source: owner, Wriston Art Center Galleries, La Vera Pohl Collection, Lawrence University: https://www.lawrence.edu/s/wriston/collection/node/1251. See below for contact info for rights.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig (German painter, printmaker, and sculptor, 1880-1938)  Title: Dancers Akrobatischer Tanz  Work Type: printmaking  Date: 1911  Material: Woodcut  Style Period: Expressionism  Repository: Wriston Art Galleries, Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin  Repository: The La Vera Pohl Collection  Accession Number: 82123  Subject: dancers, printmaking  Collection: Wriston Art Center Galleries (Lawrence University)  Collection: http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/wriston/  Rights: Contact information: Frank Lewis, Director and Curator, Wriston Art Gallery, 711 E. Boldt Way, Appleton, WI 54911; Tel: 920-832-6942; Fax: 920-832-7362; frank.c.lewis@lawrence.edu  Even after the group resettled in Berlin, Kirchner sought out the primordial sexuality of the metropolis in his series of streetwalker paintings. In the teens, Expressionist (a category into which Die Brücke and certain other German artists were incorporated around 1911) primitivism was criticized by modern artists who believed that it evidenced a failure to generate symbols for its own time (Max Beckmann, 1884–1950) and signaled a retreat from the dynamic urban and technological themes and forms appropriate to the present (Ludwig Meidner, 1884–1966). The members of Zurich and Berlin Dada would sharpen this critique of Expressionism’s inwardness. Their own experiments in performance and abstract poetry of 1916–1917 referenced African tribal music and Oceanic masks, aiming to induce regression and critique rationalized thought structures. The Blaue Reiter and Russian Primitivism Primitivism was also practiced by the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group of artists in Munich, Germany (who were also incorporated into the label of German Expressionism). Their *Blaue Reiter Almanac* of 1912 focused on European folk art freely mixed with non-Western so-called primitive arts. In line with Worringer’s schema in *Abstraction and Empathy*, members argued that they had spiritual affinities with ‘primitive’ artists and thus drew upon their art to aid in the renewal of a materialist European culture. This justified their transitional deployment of folk and tribal forms, despite their anti-historicism and anti-mimetic bent. In so doing, their leader Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) brought aspects of the primitivism of modern Russian artists like Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), and Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935), to Western Europe. These Russian artists had aided in the rediscovery of their country’s folk heritage. They engaged with icon paintings, peasant woodcuts, and other popular forms, combining them with modern influences. Franz Marc (1880–1916) of the Blaue Reiter embraced the role of the ‘savage’ artist with the task of renewing decadent European culture. August Macke (1887–1914) of this group theorized that the cabaret, the cinema, and other modern urban entertainments might take on the role of the rituals that offered emotional release in earlier ‘primitive’ cultures.  File: TheBlaueReiterAlmanac\_illustration.jpg  Figure 14 Illustration, The Blaue Reiter Almanac, 1912.  Source:  This is from *Der Blaue Reiter*, edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Munich: R Piper & Co., 1912, frontispiece. caption: Bavarian Mirror Painting, St. Martin.  I don’t know about copyright issues related to this book. Archive.org has the second edition form 1914 scanned by the University of Toronto Library: <https://archive.org/details/derblauereiter00kand>. You could ask the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York on the Lenbachhaus Munich about rights, as they own a lot of his work.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator  Title Der Blaue Reiter: St. Martin  Description From the magazine Der Blaue Reiter, 1912, published by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky  Illustration of a Bavarian glass painting  Subject Martin, Saint, Bishop of Tours, ca. 316-397  Blaue Reiter (Group of artists)  Art Doc. Ref.--Germany--20th C. A.D  Kandinsky, Wassily, 1866-1944  Marc, Franz, 1880-1916  Collection ARTstor Slide Gallery  Source Data from: University of California, San Diego  Rights ? 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris  Download Size 400,400 Fauvism and Henri Matisse The Fauve group of painters that emerged around 1905 was led by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), and included André Derain (1880–1954) and Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958). They were so labeled, as ‘wild beasts’, for their use of bright, non-naturalistic color, distortion, and for the crude and expressive qualities of their works. The terms ‘primitive’, ‘decorative’, and ‘modern’ were conjoined in the discourse around their work. These labels also connected some of the group’s artists to anarchist politics and others to contemporaneous movements that emphasized direct experiences of nature and the expression of physical enjoyment (as Gill Perry has written). Matisse’s work also partook of a classicizing primitivism by referencing Arcadian themes. Around 1910, the positive association of modernist painting with the decorative began to wane, until references to the decorative gradually became pejorative.  File: Matisse\_SeatedRiffian.jpg  Figure 15 Matisse, Seated Riffian, 1912.  Source: Owner, The Barnes Foundation: <http://www.barnesfoundation.org/collections/art-collection/object/6969/seated-riffian-le-rifain-assis>. According to info below, they must be contacted for rights.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Henri Matisse, 1869-1954 Title: Seated Riffian (Le rifain assis) Date: between November and December 1912 Material: Oil on canvas Measurements: 78 7/8 x 63 1/4 in. (200.3 x 160.7 cm) Repository: Barnes Foundation Accession Number: BF264 Collection: Barnes Foundation Collection: http://www.barnesfoundation.org/ ID Number: 6969 Rights: Image © 2010 The Barnes Foundation. All Rights Reserved. Rights: Contact information: Visual Resources Manager, The Barnes Foundation, 300 N. Latch's Lane, Merion, PA 19066; Phone: 610-667-0290 x1044; Fax: 610-664-4026; Email: rights@barnesfoundation.org  Fauve artists began to work consciously in dialogue with African art around 1906, collecting African masks and other ethnographic objects, as would Cubists and Surrealists. Certain conventions from these appeared in their works. Matisse deliberately distorted forms and courted awkwardness in his works, partly under the influence of African sculpture. He asserted that his concerns were formal and pictorial, that is, internal to his paintings and process-oriented, rather than directly with expressive or ‘primitive’ subject matter.    Matisse also produced a number of works that take up traditional Orientalist motifs and figures during and after travels to North Africa around 1910. These works were treated differently than academic Orientalist painting by contemporary advocates of Matisse and more recently by certain historians because they are not anecdotal and do not deploy other tropes and techniques of academic Orientalist painting. Instead, they are highly abstracted. However, this distinction upholds a practice of separating formally innovative modern artists from the Orientalist and colonial imaginary (as the scholar Roger Benjamin has shown). Pablo Picasso and Cubism File: Picasso\_portrait.jpg  Figure 16 Photograph of Picasso in his studio, 1908.  Source: Patricia Leighten and Mark Antliff’s *Cubism and Culture* (Thames & Hudson, 2001) publishes this image on page 24. According to the book, the image is published courtesy of Mr. Stanley Jernow. See info below about rights.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Picasso, Pablo, 1881-1973 Creator:  Title: Photo: Picasso in his studio in in the Bateau-Lavoir, Paris Date: 1908 Subject: Picasso, Pablo, 1881-1973 Subject: Artists&apos; studios Subject: Painting--Spain--20th C. A.D Subject: Portraits--Artists Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego Rights: © Succession Picasso  Pablo Picasso’s (1881–1973) pre-Cubist work dated circa 1906 referenced the simplified, expressive forms of archaic Iberian sculpture and its revival in Spain in the 1880s and 1890s. Subsequently, Picasso developed Cubism together with Georges Braque (1882–1963) between approximately 1907 and 1911. Influenced by the Fauves, Picasso collected and made references to African sculpture in his proto-Cubist and early Cubist work to undermine and overturn Western conventions of the figure and pictorial space, as well as Western sexual ideals. This is famously the case in Picasso’s 1907 *Demoiselles d’Avignon*. The facial features of the painting’s glaring, exhibitionist female figures, understood to be prostitutes based on Picasso’s earlier studies for the work, are derived from aspects of Iberian sculptures and Oceanic and African masks and figures recently encountered at the Musée d’Ethnographie at the Palais de Trocadéro. These figures possessed connotations of excessive sexuality associated with non-Western peoples, particularly women. They have also been interpreted as representing Picasso’s own sexual anxieties and broader cultural fears of women’s changing status in modern society, as well as Picasso’s notions of that time of the ‘magical’ and apotropaic nature of African sculpture. In Cubist works by Picasso after this time, the forms of African sculpture offered means of formal simplification and experimentation. These African forms, when juxtaposed with Western academic and other representational codes, revealed the conventional, or arbitrary, nature of all representational systems.  Cubist artists had links to and overlapped with French anarchist and left-wing circles that opposed colonialism and strongly criticised colonial policies and atrocities committed in Africa of which news arrived in France in 1905 and 1906, as Patricia Leighten has shown. Despite these oppositional contexts, Picasso’s early artistic deployment of African sculpture reflects stereotypical contemporary views of Africa and the way that even those opposed to colonial exploitation remained embedded in conventional binaries of ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’.  File: Picasso\_Demoiselles\_d’Avignon.jpg  Figure 17 Picasso, Demoiselles d’Avignon, 1907  Source: owner, Museum of Modern Art: <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>.  image source: H. H. Arnason and Elizabeth Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, Pearson, 2012.  additional info (this image is not from ArtStor):  Pablo Picasso. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. 1907. Oil on canvas. 8' x 7' 8’ (2.43 x 2.33 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. (333.1939). Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  In addition to its influence on the painting and sculpture of Fauves and Cubists in the first decade of the twentieth century, African and other ‘primitive’ sculpture had a great impact on the development of modern art more broadly beginning in the teens. As indicated by the work of the Fauves and Cubists, the fascination with the three-dimensional ‘primitive’, ‘fetish’, or ‘totem’, superseded the interest in two-dimensional ‘primitive’ ornamental forms from different parts of the world that had dominated earlier scholarship and art concerned with the ‘primitive’. African and other ‘primitive’ sculpture would greatly influence modern sculpture, including, for example the work of Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957). These influences included the folk arts of his native Romania. Purism Many modernist celebrations of modernity and the machine seemingly antithetical to primitivism also partook of a kind of primitivism. Purism was a strand of modern art started in 1918 in France by Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966) and Le Corbusier (1887–1965) that continued through the mid-1920s. Artists associated with Purism were swept up in the ‘return to order’ of post-WWI France. They celebrated both continuity with aspects of France’s past and modern technology for the purpose of joining in the effort to rebuild France after the war. In Fernand Léger’s (1881-1955) Purist works, figures made up of basic geometric shapes represent everyday French people, including workers and artisans. They coexist harmoniously with machines, machine-made objects, urban scenes, and nature. Léger tried to create forms that were modern and ‘primitive’ at the same time, simplified, anonymous, machine-like figures and forms of modern people at leisure. His simplified forms and conceptual approach were inspired by a range of Western and non-Western arts that he considered ‘primitive’ (for him, this included aspects of classical art) and opposed the art of the Renaissance. Non-Western Primitivisms The primitivisms of modernist artists of non-European or North American origin from across the world—for example, Diego Rivera (1886–1957) in Mexico, Wilfredo Lam (Cuban, 1902–1982), associated with Surrealism, and Indian artists like Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941)—demonstrate how non-Western artists also used primitivist approaches. Often, they were used to assert and fashion national identities and national artistic idioms and to engage in anti-colonial struggles. As Elaine O’Brien has written, cultural appropriation, including primitivism, was a key strategy of the cosmopolitan artists who created global modern arts, in different locales and circumstances and under conditions of urbanism and accelerating cross-cultural exchange.   Surrealism The Surrealist group of artists and thinkers, including their putative leader André Breton (1896–1966), initially formed from Parisian Dada groups, and, like Dada, their philosophies were based on a rejection of Western rationality shaped by experiences of the horror of World War I. They intertwined their primitivism with Freudian notions of the unconscious and theories and practices of chance. They were well read in ethnographic literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This literature was critical to their fascination with dreams, myth, magic, and totemic objects. Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) 1910 *Totem and Taboo* and similar works bridged their interests in psychology and ethnography. The Surrealists were interested not only in ‘primitive’ art, but they also sought out and provoked otherness in everyday urban life.  File: Cartier-Bresson\_Studio.jpg  Figure 18 Cartier-Bresson, photograph of Breton’s studio, 1961.  Source: According to caption information below, Magnum Photos owns this image and must be contacted for rights.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Henri Cartier-Bresson Title: EUROPE. 1961. France. Paris. 18th arrondissement. Rue Pigalle. The French poet André BRETON's home. Date: 1961 Subject: PARIS Subject: France Collection: Magnum Photos ID Number: PAR88989.jpg Source: Image and original data provided by Magnum Photos Source: http://www.magnumphotos.com/ Rights: ©Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos Rights: Contact information: Mark Lubell, Bureau Chief, Magnum Photos, 151 West 25th Street, New York, New York 10001-7204  Surrealist artists collected a range of ‘primitive’ artifacts from Oceania, Africa, North America, and elsewhere. They displayed these in Surrealist exhibitions alongside their artworks and other objects they collected, including castoff objects. They drew upon the work of the contemporaneous Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris founded in 1925, led by Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) and also including Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) and other ethnographers. Surrealist practices were also contemporaneous with a broader French and European craze for the exotic in the 1920s and 1930s, including for jazz and other aspects of African-American culture.  Surrealist artists who put these ideas into practice in various artistic mediums also include André Masson (1896–1987), Max Ernst (1891–1976), and Man Ray (1890–1976). There were also a number of dissident Surrealists who broke from Bréton’s control and practiced hybrid ethnographic and literary mediums. For example, Georges Bataille’s (1897–1962) journal *Documents* regularly featured ethnographic themes. Associated German critic Carl Einstein (1885-1940) rejected the evolutionary primitivisms of earlier scholars and artists and engaged with ‘primitive’ art in formal and aesthetic terms. Abstract Expressionism Beginning around the mid-1940s, the group of American artists who came to be known as the Abstract Expressionists—including Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)—referenced the ‘primitive’ and archaic in their writings and art, claiming to have deep psychological affinities with these. They were in synch with a popular discourse on the situation of ‘modern man’ (in Michael Leja’s words) in the wake of world war, in the age of atomic weapons. In this context, the ‘primitive’ was a means by which to come to terms with the effects of science, technology, and the atrocities of recent history. These artists conceived of their art as expressing universal truths about human experience. In carrying out their primitivism, these artists used various means. For example, Rothko deployed mysterious biomorphic shapes from a Surrealist idiom, and the pictograph was an important form for Gottlieb.  File: Gottlieb\_AlkahestofParacelsus.jpg  Figure 19 Gottlieb, Alkahest of Paracelsus, 1945.  Source: owner, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/alkahest-of-paracelsus-34184>. See MFA link and info below about licensing.  image source: ArtStor  ArtStor caption:  Creator: Gottlieb, Adolph, 1903-1974 Title: Alkahest of Paracelsus Date: 1945 Material: oil on canvas Measurements: 60x44' Subject: Painting--United States--20th C. A.D Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego Rights: Art (c) Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.  Rights: This work of art is protected by copyright and/or related rights and may not be reproduced in any manner, except as permitted under the ARTstor Digital Library Terms and Conditions of Use, without the prior express written authorization of VAGA, 350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2820, New York, NY 10118. Tel.: 212-736-6666, fax: 212-736-6767, email: info@vagarights.com. Other Postwar Primitivisms Other major post-WWII primitivisms included that of Art Brut, led by Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985), and the COBRA group, led by Asger Jorn (1914–1973).  Art historian Heinrich Wölfflin’s (1864–1945) 1915 book *Basic Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* was structured around the contrast of styles. Instead of the unity of the classical were the self-sufficient ‘languages’ of Renaissance and the Baroque art, signaling the rise of the historicist discipline of art history. Even within this relativized schema, however, there was no proper place for the pre-Renaissance ‘primitive’ in conceptions of art and art history, aside from its function as supplying origins. The problematic concepts and practices of the ‘primitive’ and primitivism continue to challenge us. |
| Further reading:  (Ades and Baker)  (Ames)  (Antliff and Leighten)  (Benjamin)  (Chave)  (Clifford)  (Connelly)  (Craven)  (Dickerman)  (Eisenman)  (Eisenman, Paul Gauguin)  (Eisenman, ‘Symbolism and the Dialectics of Retreat’)   (Errington)  (Fabian)  (Flam and Deutsch)  (Foster)  (Foster, ‘Primitive Scenes’)  (Franke)  (Goldwater)  (Gray)  (Grewe)  (Halbertsma)  (Halbertsma, ‘The Call of the Canon: Why Art History Cannot Do Without’)  (Herbert)  (Hiller)  (Kelly)  (Kuper)  (Leighten)  (Leja)  (Lloyd)  (Long)  (Lovejoy and Boas)  (Mitter)  (Nochlin)  (O’Brien)  (Perry)  (Ratnam)  (Rhodes)  (Rubin)  (Said)  (Schapiro)  (Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art)  (R. Shiff)  (Solomon-Godeau)  (Torgovnick)  (Tythacott) |