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| **Primitivism** |
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| Primitivism in the context of modern art refers to artistic practices, including lifestyles and the development of personae, and accompanying modes of thought. It refers above all to the ways in which a number of artists and groups valorised and drew upon aspects of non-Western art and culture, especially of “tribal” arts and societies, but also Eastern ones, as well as Western non-classical art forms, including European folk arts. They appropriated these as subject matter and as a fund of selective visual characteristics and representational codes, treated synthetically in opposition to academic techniques, and conceptually in opposition to the category of the civilised. Primitivism was itself synthesised from a combination of long-standing notions, prejudices, idealisations, from mythology, philosophy, literature, travel writings, anthropological theory, popular culture, colonial propaganda, and encounters with non-Western artifacts and peoples, facilitated by colonialism. This giving-of-value and appropriation of forms and subject matter was carried out for a number of interlinked purposes, in the quest to overturn academic norms, in the practice of modernist formal invention, in the pursuit of greater expressiveness, for reasons of personal and artistic rivalry serving the avant-garde logic of trumping past styles, bohemian provocation, identity-production in relation to others, as part of appropriative exercises of power, and, not least, as forms oppositional to Western modernity and modernisation, and capitalist economic structures and relationships. |
| Primitivism in the context of modern art refers to artistic practices, including lifestyles and the development of personae, and accompanying modes of thought. It refers above all to the ways in which a number of artists and groups valorised and drew upon aspects of non-Western art and culture, especially of “tribal” arts and societies, but also Eastern ones, as well as Western non-classical art forms, including European folk arts. They appropriated these as subject matter and as a fund of selective visual characteristics and representational codes, treated synthetically in opposition to academic techniques, and conceptually in opposition to the category of the civilised. Primitivism was itself synthesised from a combination of long-standing notions, prejudices, idealisations, from mythology, philosophy, literature, travel writings, anthropological theory, popular culture, colonial propaganda, and encounters with non-Western artifacts and peoples, facilitated by colonialism. This giving-of-value and appropriation of forms and subject matter was carried out for a number of interlinked purposes, in the quest to overturn academic norms, in the practice of modernist formal invention, in the pursuit of greater expressiveness, for reasons of personal and artistic rivalry serving the avant-garde logic of trumping past styles, bohemian provocation, identity-production in relation to others, as part of appropriative exercises of power, and, not least, as forms oppositional to Western modernity and modernisation, and capitalist economic structures and relationships.  If primitivism colluded with a network of colonial, imperial, scientific, and other discourses and interests and its practitioners partook of racist and misogynist views of non-Europeans and non-urban peoples, it also possessed critical capacities. It is useful to conceive of it as existing at exactly this juncture, as a method, as Jill Lloyd has written, of negotiating the contradictions and paradoxes of modernity itself, its liberatory possibilities, as well as its relentless abstraction, alienation, contingency, and destruction of past values and stable social structures.  **Primitivism’s Philosophical and Theoretical Background**  Modern artistic primitivism drew upon an extensive and complex history of primitivist thinking in Western culture, from antiquity, to the primitivist modes of thought developed in relationship to the travel literature and anthropological theory of the “Age of Discovery” and the Enlightenment, to nineteenth-century exoticism and Orientalism.  Already antique philosophers supposed that there had been early, or primitive, less civilized peoples who lived during a golden age in harmony with nature and their own impulses, without the restrictive conventions of civilized life, or savage peoples who were able to bear hardship and possessed few material goods. Modern artists imagined that life in societies with ritualized forms of violence and open practices of sexuality was superior to the internalized disciplinarity of modern cultures. Moreover, they believed that primitive peoples organically developed artistic styles and symbols suited to their cultures, that could express their relationships to the world and that were embodied in non-commodified, everyday, decorative, and religious objects, while modern culture lacked these, and instead was reliant upon the imitation of past styles that led to the production of deadened cultural forms. Different modernist primitivisms emphasized particular aspects of these notions.  In the early modern period and Enlightenment, a number of notions of the primitive were consolidated that were, as Frances Connelly has shown, formed in relation to the values of the classical tradition, including that “primitive” peoples were immersed in sense experience from which they were incapable of abstracting, such a capacity increasing during the process of cultural evolution. This sensual immersion was closely related to a notion of primal *poeisis* and a capacity for uninhibited bodily and other forms of expression, including mimicry, also limited by the course of civilization. Moreover, the notion of primitive artistic production became intertwined with the ornamental and the belief that primitive peoples were capable of decorative ingenuity. Other forms associated with the primitive included the hieroglyphic, the fetish, and the grotesque, as Connelly writes. Primitive art as conceptual category encompassed such traits and forms thought to be typical of early or primordial art production.  Primitivism was also nourished on Enlightenment thinkers’ preoccupation with the origins of cultural institutions and human capacities and on Romantic notions of culture that valued origins and cultural “earliness.”  The fundamental notion that primitive peoples animated the external world, personifying natural powers, while modern scientific thought is capable of identifying physical forces at the basis of the functioning of the natural world was both a component of a set of ideas about the primitive and a conceptual division that generated modernity’s subject-object relationships.  **The Primitive in Art Theory and Mass Culture around 1900**  Artists practicing primitivism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries would draw in addition upon ideas generated by the intense interest in artistic origins of German-speaking *Kunstwissenschaft* (scientific art history), from Alois Riegl’s (1858-1905) writing on Maori art and on ornament, to Wilhelm Worringer’s (1881-1965) 1908 *Abstraction and Empathy* and other writings, a body of work that deserves consideration in this context as modernist.  File:Riegel\_illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration to Riegl, Problems of Style, 1893  Source: unknown  File:Semper\_illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration to Semper, Style, 1861-1863.  Source: unknown  Riegl’s 1890/1893 theorization of the primordial artist driven by the artistic will to produce non-instrumental, decorative forms, which he conceived in vigorous opposition to the predominance of “materialist” theories propagated by archaeologists and anthropologists debating the origins of prehistoric and primitive ornament, would provide a touchstone for the discourse on primitive ornament and art, setting the notion of artistic volition at its center. Gottfried Semper’s (1803-1879) 1861–1863 *Style* had already initiated a scholarly turn toward minor arts and their origins in order to counter historicism in architecture and design. In addition, Semper’s writing on jewelry freely moved between historical, ancient civilizations and contemporary primitive peoples, locating in primitive adornment original principles of ornamental order and design.  Art historian Aby Warburg’s (1866-1929) thought sought to grasp deep meanings about the relationship of man, nature, and the cosmos in primitive art, giving place not only to ornament, but also to symbols and rituals. Recognizing the contaminated state of so-called primitive culture in the present, in its ruins in the American Southwest, he nevertheless deployed the technique of interpreting contemporary living primitive peoples as vestiges of early pagan humanity, as the embodiment of traits common to early cultures outside of progressive historical time, at the beginning of a continuum from pagan to modern culture.  File:Warburg\_Images.jpg  Figure Illustration to Warburg, "Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America." 1895/1923  Source: unknown  File: Worringer\_Illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration to Worringer, Form in Gothic, 1912.  Source: unknown  It has been characteristic of cultural primitivism since antiquity to find in currently living primitive peoples survivals of imagined chronologically early peoples. This was the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when prehistoric art was discovered and intensely debated, and its two poles – naturalistic and “geometric,” corresponding to Worringer’s empathetic and abstract modes – examined in scholarly and popular texts. It is important to note that this study of primitive art – which ranged from the prehistoric, to many other forms of the non-classical throughout art history, to the art of contemporary peoples – provided extra-historical “beginnings” and foundations for many disciplines in the process of institutionalization at this time, from anthropology, to art history, to comparative musicology, and others, discourses that accompanied and were intertwined with practices and theories of modern art.  File:Boas\_illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration to Boas, Primitive Art, 1927.  Source: unknown  This goes to the fundamentally “allochronic” nature of primitivist discourses, which posit that non-Western or non-industrialized, non-urban cultures from the past and present exist outside of progressive, historical time, and are not coeval with the peoples of Western industrialized societies.  In response to this literature, anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) theorized in his1927 *Primitive Art* more benign understandings of the primitive, extrapolating qualities believed to be common to primitive arts, in a non-evolutionist frame of analysis, providing these with positive and equal value with Western art forms.    Just as important as this scholarly interest was the popular mass-cultural primitivism that permeated Western European metropolises in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Freak shows, circuses, Worlds Fairs, museums, and other venues displayed primitive peoples and artifacts, and artists drew as much on these as they did on ethnographic museums and scholarly and other literature.  Modern artistic primitivism was generated in conjunction with these histories and theories as well as with modern racial theories that buttressed colonialism and its concomitant forms of class and gender oppression.  **Impressionism and Post-Impressionism**  Deliberately regressive qualities and desires were crucial to forming the persona of the modern artist that crossed artistic styles, even those that did not engage with primitivist subject matter. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) wrote of the regressive, deliberately childlike, spiritually convalescent, and intoxicated qualities that characterized the “painter of modern life,” necessary counterparts to his moral subtlety, love of incognito, and urbane sophistication. The former rendered him especially sensitive to forms, colors, and other stimuli of the urban environment, which he experienced as nervous shocks in an unmediated way, allowing him 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) further theorized a modern artist who could experience the world directly, naively, bypassing forms of historical mediation and trained academic imitation. This artist and his/her style were intentionally awkward and primitive, aiming to produce art directly from his/her unique temperament and from nature, without the processes of modifying past visual sources, as academic training taught artists to do. These works were distorted, flattened, and had unfinished qualities, relative to academic painting. This mythology imagined a “savage” artist whose sensorium directly interfaced with nature and who thus produced more sincere and expressive works.  Critic Roger Fry’s (1866-1934) theorization of Post-Impressionism propagated this view of the immediacy of artistic imaginative life that was more sensually receptive than the instinctual operations of everyday, instrumental transactions, and even implied an unlearning of this goal-oriented deployment of the senses.  File:Fry\_illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration to Fry, "Children's Art," 1917.  Source: unknown  Fry combined these ideas with theories of primitive and children’s art, furthering the common notion that the former was comparable to the latter, primitives exemplifying the childhood of humanity, and children recapitulating its development. He was also one theorist of the recent notion that while the very earliest (Paleolithic) arts were illusionistic, before the development of religious life and basic forms of conceptualization, typical early and primitive arts that followed immediately thereafter (Neolithic onwards) were “conceptual” depictions of mental images and not imitative.  **Paul Gauguin and Symbolism**  The work and life of Symbolist Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) are often the starting point of analyses of modernist primitivism. He and fellow Post-Impressionist artist Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) plotted their flight from the avarice of modern European culture in southern France and imagined the South Seas as the furthest horizon of this escape, based upon their knowledge of exoticist and colonial literature, art, and popular culture. They believed they would find refuge from European relations of production and property and the decadence and hypocrisy of modern European society in a primitive land of abundance, in harmony with nature, full of erotic delights, and artistic freedom.  File:Gauguin\_TheYellowChrist.jpg  Figure Gauguin, *The Yellow Christ*, 1889.  Source: unknown  Gauguin and other similarly disposed artists had already sought primitive culture in Europe, in Brittany, France, in the last years of the 1880s. Here, Gauguin convinced himself that he discovered ancient and “savage” ways of life, in the seemingly historical costumes of its people, communal religious and other rituals, and seemingly unchanged rural landscape. He was in denial of the rationalization of this region’s agriculture and the modern re-invention of its culture for touristic purposes, escaping the conditions of modern, urban France. Just as Symbolist art was non-mimetic and scorned the material, contemporary world, history, and everyday life, Gauguin’s artistic response was decorative and abstracted, seeking the world of dreams, the archaic, and the ideal.    He continued this quest in Tahiti beginning in 1890, seeking a world of easy abundance, outside of capitalist relations, and the pressures of modernity, but found this imagined harmonious primitive culture already endangered by European encroachment upon his arrival. Here too his primitivism was profoundly contradictory, exploitative, and a vehicle of retreat from modernity and of sexual and racist fantasies. As Stephen Eisenman has argued, one part of Gauguin’s primitivism can be interpreted as disingenuous, hackneyed, taking part in the imperialist and misogynist beliefs that facilitated his travels and emigration to the South Pacific. Here he sought to restore his endangered masculinity through easy access to young native women, and his works focused on them and on children, the feminine identified with the childlike and historically and culturally early. Indeed, Gauguin would carry out his artistic primitivism and formal radicalism on female bodies, a strategy common to modernist and avant-garde artistic innovation.    But it can also be argued that many of his works and attitudes critiqued Western European culture in powerful ways.  File:Gauguin\_WhereDoWeComeFrom.jpg  Figure Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897.  Source: unknown  Works including the late *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* (1897) cannily represent the different gender roles and relationships between natural and human, profane and spiritual worlds, and dream and waking life of Polynesia. They give form to non-Western forms of beauty and bodily poise, and dream, however naively, of worlds outside of capitalist forms of exploitation. His later works in Tahiti and the Marquesas used native language to oppose colonial re-education attempts, and he also joined in anti-colonial resistance movements and engaged with native sexual alternative cultures. This work also represents the syncretic character of Gauguin’s primitivism, his references not only to the art and myths of the South Seas, but also pre-Renaissance Europe, the Far East and Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.  **Worpswede**  In the 1890s and early 1900s, such attempts to retreat from urban culture to rural areas, integrated with peasant life, also took place in artists communities in Germany, for example, among the Worpswede group.  File:Modersohn-Becker\_KneelingMotherandChild.jpg  Figure Modersohn-Becker, Kneeling Mother and Child, 1907.  Source: unknown  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 and a fixation 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 a realist style, inspired by developments in France, but the work of Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) was more closely allied with Post-Impressionist techniques, also partaking of the idealization of peasants and the equating of the primitive with the feminine and natural.  **Die Brücke**  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.  File:Kirchner\_studio\_photograph.jpg  Figure Kirchner, photograph of studio, c. 1911.  Source: unknown  File:Kirchner\_studio\_photograph2.jpg  Figure Kirchner, photograph of studio, c. 1911.  Source: unknown  Using the work of Ernst Ludwig Kircher (1880-1938) as an example of this remarkable group of artists – which also included Max Pechstein (1881-1955), Erich Heckel (1880-1970), Emile Nolde (1867-1956), Fritz Bleyl (1880-1966), and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (1884-1976) – we can understand how primitivism was a way of negotiating modernity and its internal contradictions, its possibilities for personal freedom and subjective development and simultaneous abstraction of all aspects of life and personal relationships. On the other hand, it was potentially regressive, a vehicle of withdrawal from modernity into primitivist fantasies.  The group’s primitivism emerged from its members’ training in architecture and immersion in the debates of the Jugendstil decorative arts reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century. In that context, “early” non-European arts along with Western pre-Renaissance styles were positively regarded for their value in challenging historicism, academic art, and realism. Longing for a lost unity between art and life, Jugendstil and Die Brücke sought new, meaningful communal art forms and symbols and non-commodified forms of interaction between makers and consumers of objects. Extending Jugendstil’s seeking of immediate responses to nature and efforts to infuse alienated objects with spirit, Die Brücke pursued immediacy in their bohemian lifestyles and paintings, sculptures, and prints.  File: Kirchner\_AcrobaticDance.jpg  Figure Kirchner, Acrobatic Dance, 1911.  Source: unknown  File: Kirchner\_BathersThrowingReeds.jpg  Figure Kirchner, Bathers Throwing Reeds, 1909.  Source: unknown  Just as important as their work in these fine art media are their communal studio environments, in the photographs of which we can behold their lived primitivism. These environments – with their wall paintings, curtains, and homemade furniture inspired by Palau decorative arts, Ajanta cave paintings, Indian temple sculpture, among other sources, are sometimes bypassed by historians privileging what they believe is a formal integration of primitive styles that succeeds an earlier, “superficial” engagement with exotic subject matter and decoration. For our purposes, both primitivisms will be treated as compelling forms.  In the circus and cabaret images that some of this group produced around 1910, images of urban entertainment were interlocked with the interest in exotic and primitive art. These venues regularly made use of exotic themes and peoples around this time, and the animated figure of the dancer linked the primitive and the modern. Their prints and paintings of their stays in the countryside around Dresden also contained forms rhyming with and alluding to more directly primitivist works.  Even after the group resettled in Berlin, Kirchner sought out the primordial sexuality that seemed to seethe beneath the surfaces of the metropolis in his series of streetwalker paintings. Around this time, however, Expressionist primitivism was criticized by other modern artists who believed that it evidenced a failure to generate symbols for its own time (Max Beckmann, 1884-1950) or signaled a retreat from the dynamic urban and technological themes and forms appropriate to the present (Ludwig Meidner, 1884-1966).  File:Jones\_GrammarofOrnament.jpg  Figure Illustration of Jones, Grammar of Ornament, 1856.  Source: unknown  The Die Brücke artists, incorporated into the broader label of Expressionism along with other artists and groups in Germany, were also drawn to media with primitive connotations like woodcarving and woodcuts. Two of their members – Pechstein and Nolde – would also travel to islands in the Pacific in further phases of their primitivism.  The studio environments of the Die Brücke point us to decorative arts reform’s crucial relationship to primitivism in modern art. Designer and reformer Owen Jones (1809-1874) wrote in his *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856 that the urge to ornament was a primordial one, from which arts modern artists should learn in order to recover their pure design instincts, returning to a childlike condition. The historicist culture that made all art and design of the past available for imitation and reproduction (in print and three-dimensionally through industrial processes) in conjunction with the cultures of collecting and display of colonialism and nationalist inter-European design competition were important backdrops for primitivism – for the discovery of primitive arts, as well as the embrace of these because of the confusions of design in the age of Worlds Fairs.  **The Blaue Reiter and Russian Primitivism**  Another primitivism was practiced by the Blaue Reiter group of artists in Munich, Germany. Their *Blaue Reiter Almanac* of 1912 focused on European folk art, freely mixed with non-Western tribal arts.  File:TheBlaueReiterAlmanac\_illustration.jpg  Figure Illustration, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, 1912.  Source: unknown  In line with Worringer’s schema in *Abstraction and Empathy*, they argued that they had spiritual affinities with primitive artists and thus drew upon their art to aid in the renewal of a decadent and materialist European culture. This justified their transitional deployment of such folk and tribal forms, despite the anti-historicism and anti-mimetic bent of their theories. In this, their leader Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was bringing to Western Europe aspects of the primitivism of modern Russian art, in its rediscovery of its folk heritage, practiced especially by artists Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962), Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964), and Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935. These artists engaged with icon paintings, peasant woodcuts, and other popular forms, combining them influences from Fauve and Post-Impressionist techniques. Franz Marc (1880-1916) of the Blaue Reiter embraced the role of the “savage” artist whose task it was to renew 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 primitive rituals that offered emotional release in earlier tribal cultures.  **Fauvism**  The Fauve group of painters emerged around 1905, led by Henri Matisse (1869-1954), and including 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. Their modernist techniques were regarded as “barbaric” and “primitive” by some critics, while others extolled these qualities. The terms “primitive,” “decorative,” and “modern” were joined in the discourse around their work.  Such labels also connected some of these artists to anarchist politics and others to contemporaneous movements that emphasized direct experiences of nature and the free expression of physical enjoyment. Matisse’s work also partook of a classicized primitivism. The positive association of modernist painting, especially primitivist, and the decorative began to be recast around the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, gradually becoming pejorative and associated exclusively with the applied arts. The Fauve artists began to work consciously in dialogue with African art, collecting African masks and other ethnographic objects, as would Cubists and Surrealists. Certain conventions from these appeared in their works. Through the use of primitivizing distortions in his works, Matisse tried to draw attention to the specifically pictorial nature of his concerns. Their interest in these objects was related to the re-exhibition of GAUGUIN’s works at this time and to typical notions of the primitive in the broader culture.    File:Matisse\_SeatedRiffian.jpg  Figure Matisse, Seated Riffian, 1912.  Source:unknown  Matisse also produced a number of works during and after travels to North Africa in 1906 and 1912-1913. These take up traditional Orientalist motifs and figures. These works have been treated differently by contemporary advocates of and subsequent historians of Matisse because they are not anecdotal and do not deploy other realist tropes and techniques of academic Orientalist painting, and are instead highly abstracted. However, this distinction is dubious (as Roger Benjamin has shown), and upholds, in addition, a practice of maintaining a number of avant-garde artists whose formal innovations seem to place them outside of the ordinary linkages of Orientalist and primitivist artists with the colonial and imperialist imaginary and its visual culture.  File:Picasso\_portrait.jpg  Figure Photograph of Picasso in his studio, 1908.  Source: unknown  File:Picasso\_Demoiselles\_d’Avignon.jpg  Figure Picasso, Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907.  Source: unknown  **Cubism**  Cubist Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) primitivism had a number of phases. His work around 1905 referenced the simplified forms of archaic Iberian sculpture and its revival in Spain in the 1890s. Influenced by the Fauvs, Cubists were drawn to African sculpture, while previously primarily two-dimensional and ornamental forms had been of interest to art theorists and primitivist artists. Picasso’s primitivist work sought to engage with distorted forms perceived as “ugly.” African art was deployed in his works to undermine Western conventions of the figure and of pictorial space. It offered means of formal simplification and experimentation, in painting and in sculpture. In his fellow Cubist Georges Braque’s (1882-1963) works, it was used to question and juxtapose different representational codes.  In Picasso’s 1907 *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Western sexual ideals were aggressively attacked. In this work*,* it is clear how primitivism was a mode through which male modernist artists expressed their anxieties about modern culture and the changing status of women within it, as well as an aggressive mode of inter-artistic competition.  Art historians have shown the anti-colonialist aspects of Cubist culture, its links to anarchist and leftist opposition to colonialism, exhibiting the contradictory possibilities of primitivism. While their deployment of African sculpture reflects, in many ways, stereotypical contemporary views of Africa,” they can also be regarded as part of these oppositional contexts.  Picasso’s work exemplifies historiographic dilemmas in the interpretation of modernist primitivism. The important 1984 “‘Primitivism’ and 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern” exhibition at MoMA asserted a formalist reading of this art, using Picasso as its most important example. It took to heart Picasso’s denials of influence by primitive art, while denigrating other varieties of modernist primitivism that engaged explicitly with primitive subject matter.  **Purism**  Many forms of modernist celebrations of the machine and speed also partook of a kind of primitivism. For example, Fernand Léger (French, 1881-1955) tried to create forms that were modern and primitive at the same time, anonymous machinic forms that seemed to be mythical figures of a future society.  **Non-Western Primitivisms**  The primitivisms of modernist non-Western artists across the world, like David Siquieros (1896-1974), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) in Mexico, artists in India like Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) and Sunayani Devi (1875-1962), demonstrate how non-Western artists utilized primitivist tropes to assert and fashion national identities and to engage in anti-colonial struggles.    **Surrealism**  Artists and thinkers associated with Surrealism engaged with other primitivisms, intertwining these with their primary preoccupations with Freudian notions of the unconscious and theories and practices of chance.  File:Cartier-Bresson\_Studio.jpg  Figure Cartier-Bresson, photograph of Breton's studio, 1961.  Source: unknown  Surrealists like André Breton (1896-1966) and associated thinkers (including dissidents) Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Michel Leiris (1901-1990) were not only interested in primitive art, but also they attempted to produce and sought otherness in everyday life and in European culture. They collected many kinds of castoff everyday objects and primitive artifacts and exhibited these together with Surrealist works. They drew upon the work of the Institute of Ethnology founded in 1925 and led by Marcel Mauss(1872-1950), and associated also with Luchien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939) and Paul Rivet. Their early enthusiasm for the primitive coincided with the craze for all things African in Paris, but they gravitated towards Oceanic and other objects. Bataille’s journal *Documents* regularly included ethnographic themes. Associated German critic Carl Einstein (1885-1940) rejected the evolutionary primitivisms of earlier scholars and artists and tried to engage 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 primitive and archaic art and peoples in their writings and art, claiming to have deep psychological affinities with these. In this they were in synch with a popular discourse on the situation of “modern man” in the wake of world war and in the age of atomic weapons. As in earlier primitivisms, the primitive was a means by which to debate the effects of science, technology, and material, objective culture. In the U.S. at this time, it was also a figure through which to come to terms with the atrocities of recent history, which seemed to reveal that primitive and modern man lived in a continuum, with timeless reserves of cruelty and barbarism, and accompanying responses of terror and fear.  File:Gottlieb\_AlkahestofParacelsus.jpg  Figure Gottlieb, Alkahest of Paracelsus, 1945.  Source: unknown  Along these lines, these artists conceived of their art as meditations on man’s condition and relationship to the cosmos, expressing universal truths about human experience. They deployed animated, mysterious biomorphic shapes from a Surrealist idiom, referencing the unconscious and psychological struggle, but also the hieroglyph was an important form for them, especially for Gottlieb, before they were associated with heroic gestural abstraction.  **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 1915 *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)  (Ames)  (Benjamin)  (Chave)  (Clifford)  (Connelly)  (Craven)  (Eisenman, Gauguin’s Skirt)  (Eisenman, Symbolism and the Dialectics of Retreat)  (Eisenman, Paul Gauguin)  (Flam)  (Fleckner)  (Franke)  (Fabian)  (Foster, 1903)  (Foster, The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art)  (Goldwater)  (Gray)  (Herbert)  (Kuper)  (Leighten and Antliff)  (Leja)  (Lloyd)  (Lovejoy and Boas)  (Mitter)  (Noclin)  (Perry)  (Pollock and Orton)  (Rampley)  (Rhodes)  (Rubin)  (Said)  (Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art)  (Shiff, From Primitivist Phylogeny to Formalist Ontogeny: Roger Fry and Children’s Drawings)  (Solomon-Godeau)  (Tythacott)  **Primary Sources:**  (Aurier)  (Baudelaire)  (Boas)  (Einstein)  (Frazer)  (Freud)  (Fry)  (Gauguin)  (Jones)  (Kandinsky, The Spiritual in Art)  (Kandinsky, Macke and Marc, The Blaue Reiter Almanac)  (Riegl, Neuseeländische Kunst)  (Riegl, Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament)  (Semper, Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics)  (Semper, Concerning the Formal Principles of Ornament and Its Significance as Artistic Symbol)  (Tylor)  (Warburg)  (Wölfflin)  (Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy)  (Worringer, Form in Gothic)  (Zola) |