**Cultural Anthropology**

The development of cultural anthropology, which is the study of human culture and its variations, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries played a major role in Modernism. Anthropological accounts of tribal peoples, often termed “primitive” or “savage,” fascinated modernist artists, who found in the anthropologists’ descriptions of tribal behaviors, social organization, material culture, and ritual practices exciting and exotic alternatives to modern cultural beliefs, practices, and ways of making art. Writers such as D. H. Lawrence found in anthropological accounts of tribal peoples intuitive modes of perception and behavior at odds with civilized, “rational” ways of thinking and acting. T. S. Eliot and others found in the evolutionary anthropology of James Frazer, author of the renowned *The Golden* Bough, forms of belief and ritual that could inspire the formation of new modern art forms. As well, Eliot found in Frazer’s textual method of comparing and juxtaposing “primitive” and “civilized,” and ancient and modern, peoples the basis for a non-narrative way of organizing modern art, the “mythical method” he called it, which in one review he claimed formed the basis of organization for James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and which, arguably, also helped to shape his own poetic modernist masterwork *The Waste Land* (*Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published in the same year, 1922). Also, tribal tools, ornaments, and religious/ritual objects brought to the West by anthropologists and traders became inspirations for, and as well the formal basis of, important early modernist visual art by Picasso, Braques, and others. In general terms cultural anthropology participated in and produced a societal urge for the “primitive” in modern culture of the early 20th century.

Cultural anthropology of the early 20th century was hardly comprised of a single, static set of approaches to the study of human culture. The evolutionary anthropology of Frazer and others that so vitally influenced early modernists assumed that cultures could be arranged and judged on an evolutionary scale, with the most “primitive” tribes on the bottom and “civilized” Westerners at the top. The early 20th-century anthropological theories that supplanted evolutionary anthropology tended to focus on the study of an individual culture in its own right, attempting to elucidate and interpret the distinct characteristics of that culture, rather than comparing that culture to others on some hypothetical evolutionary scale. Such non-evolutionary methods, as practiced in America by Franz Boas and his disciples, linked evolutionary theory to racism, and gave rise to the idea of cultural relativism, which in general argues that cultures must be regarded according to their own belief sets rather than judged by some benchmark of what is believed to be “civilized.” While the anthropology that articulated and argued for cultural relativism did not exert as overt an “influence” upon modernist artists, cultural relativism is one of a number of theories of relativism, or relativity, in the early 20th century that knocked off-kilter conventional assumptions of the centrality and superiority of Western, rational ways of knowing, and profoundly impacted, and was so generative in, modernist art.