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“Primitivism” Entry for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*

Modernist primitivism was an eclectic, decentralized movement in Western art and literature that responded to and incorporated purportedly primitive subject matter and art forms. It had no central program or unified style, but consisted of a set of shared tropes (Torgovnick). Primitivists used their often fabricated or generalized conceptions of the primitive as tools for challenging Western mores, technological advancements, and aesthetic conventions. Some sought to flee the complexity and restraints of Western civilization by embracing primitive alternatives, whether prehistoric, ancient, or contemporaneous, especially the tribal cultures of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Such cultures seemed to offer a simpler and more authentic way of life, entailing close community, spiritual vitality, harmony with nature, and sexual freedom. Prefigured in the ancient myth of the Golden Age and in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s noble savage, primitivism acquired new urgency in the face of urbanization and rapid technological advancements. While primarily an idealizing rhetoric, primitivism is sometimes also thought to encompass pejorative stereotypes (Torgovnick, Gikandi). Paradigmatic examples include D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*; the Tahitian paintings of Paul Gauguin (see Image 1); Pablo Picasso’s African mask-inspired *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (see Image 2); and the so-called *danse sauvage* of Josephine Baker (see Image 3).

A fascination with the primitive was spurred by unprecedented late nineteenth-century imperial expansion that brought Westerners into increasing contact with other cultures, and by the rise of modern psychology and anthropology. Sigmund Freud associated primitive cultures with unrestrained primal drives, which he argued were merely repressed, not vanquished, in civilized society. (The threat of regressing to savagery is explored in Joseph Conrad’s 1899 *Heart of Darkness*, which rejects romantic primitivism by expressing an Englishman’s horror of kinship with indigenous Africans.) Like Freud’s works, Sir James Frazer’s comparative mythology, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), seized the imagination of modern writers by provocatively juxtaposing primitive rituals and modern religion. Margaret Mead’s best-selling *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) furthered the primitivist vogue by depicting native life as a foil to the complexity, repression, and fragmentation of mainstream American society (see Image 4).

D. H. Lawrence was among the period’s most passionate literary primitivists. In *Women in Love* (1920)*,* an African fetish serves as the catalyst for unleashing primal urges, infamously spurring two male characters to initiate a blood brotherhood in a naked wrestling match (Bell). In his Southwest writings, including “The Hopi Snake Dance” and *St. Mawr* (1925), Lawrence celebrated Pueblo Indian cultures as an alternative to spiritually bankrupt modernity, even as he worried about their demise in the face of rising consumerism, tourism, and the mechanization of daily life (Snyder). Somewhat more ambivalently, in *The Plumed Serpent* (1925)*,* Lawrence envisions a revival of pre-Christian religion in Mexico.

Lawrence’s romantic primitivism may be contrasted with the self-conscious primitivism of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot draws on the anthropology of James Frazer and Jessie Weston, weaving allusions to the Fisher King and ancient vegetation cults into a portrait of modern disillusionment. Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915) stages an encounter between English tourists and indigenous South Americans, but rather than lauding the tribal way of life, Woolf dramatizes barriers to cross-cultural understanding (Snyder).

The life-myth of French painter Paul Gauguin epitomizes the primitivist quest to rediscover a simple, intensely spiritual life in harmony with nature, as evoked by his Tahitian paintings, like *Nave Nave Moe,* or “Fragrant Water” (1894) (see Image 5). Having fled the trammels of civilization, Gauguin sought refuge among the Polynesian people of the South Seas, taking up a mistress, and actively promoting an image of himself as an artist gone native. Yet his quest was foiled by the deleterious effects of colonialism on native culture and religion, as he privately acknowledged (Rhodes). Gauguin’s case reveals that primitivism often entails fantasy projection (Solomon-Godeau).

Around 1906, several avant-garde artists in Paris—including André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso—became passionately interested in African art, which they began to collect and, in different ways, emulate. Picasso’s renowned painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) reveals the influence of pre-Roman Iberian reliefs as well as African tribal masks from the Ivory Coast and Gabon, which Picasso first encountered at the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro*. Seized by the masks’ apparent magical power as fetish objects or “weapons” against hostile spiritual forces, Picasso was inspired to harness their force (Flam 33).

*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* assaults viewers not only with its subject matter—five naked prostitutes stare boldly out of the nearly 8’ square canvas—but also by radically breaking from the conventions of realistic composition and perspective. Instead of presenting three-dimensional nudes with soft contours, Picasso violently reworks the tradition with sharp, angular lines and a proto-cubist use of simultaneous profile and front-view. Jarring facial distortions, especially of the two right-hand figures, modeled on African masks, further Picasso’s conception of the primitive as violent, raw, and powerful.

Some art critics have downplayed the extent to which Picasso was directly influenced by African art, to emphasize the artist’s inventive genius (Goldwater). This debate forms part of a larger one, spurred by the Museum of Modern Art’s controversial 1984 exhibition, “*Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* which was widely criticized for reinforcing Western colonialist attitudes by ignoring historical and cultural contexts of tribal artworks, and by mythologizing Modern art. While some have seen Western artists’ relationship to African culture and artifacts as directly analogous to colonialism (Gikandi), others have argued that modern artists regarded tribal cultures with admiration and respect, and that art always involves formal borrowing (Flam and Deutch) or even “translation” (Willmott).

In the realm of performance art, the radically innovative ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (or *The Rite of Spring*) provoked riots among spectators upon its 1913 Paris premiere for its rhythmic, dissonant score; its violently unconventional dance movements; and its shockingly pagan theme, involving a fertility ritual and human sacrifice. Also in Paris, in the twenties, African-American celebrity Josephine Baker scintillated audiences with her *danse sauvage* at the Folies-Bergère. In this infamous routine (see clip), Baker appeared wearing only a G-string bedecked with silk bananas. Surrounded by tropical vines, foliage, and a palm tree, and accompanied by two loincloth-clad black men beating tom-toms, Baker catered to primitivist fantasies (Martin).

Baker’s fame formed part of the postwar zeal for black music, dance, art, and literature that in Paris was called *negrophilia.*  The desire to recover a more primal existence associated with black culture flourished in societies reeling from the mechanized horrors of world war. After the war, the passion for collecting African art spread in avant-garde and bohemian circles, while listening to jazz and ragtime and dancing the Charleston and the Cakewalk became fashionable (Blake). Noted artists associated with *negrophilia* include the poet Guillaume Apollinaire; Surrealists Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille; and poet and *Negro Anthology* editor, Nancy Cunard (Archer-Straw).

In the United States, the artistic and intellectual flowering known retrospectively as the Harlem Renaissance was likewise underway and, as Langston Hughes later put it, “the Negro was in Vogue”. While the Renaissance provided African American writers and artists with unprecedented opportunities for publication and performance, the marketplace pressured them to conform to primitivist stereotypes, as captured by the nickname for a strip of Harlem nightclubs frequented by white customers: Jungle Alley. Hughes records the thrill of the period’s craze for African American culture, along with the uneasiness of being the object of a primitivist gaze, when “strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo” (152).

1244 words

Paratextual Materials

* Josephine Baker’s *danse sauvage* --video clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmw5eGh888Y>

* Josephine Baker in Banana Skirt from the Folies Bergère production "Un Vent de Folie" (1927)
  + public domain: photographer French Walery (1863-1935) died more than 70 years ago
* Picasso’s 1907 *Les Demoiselles D’Avignon*, inspired by African masks
  + Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P.Bliss Bequest. Copyright 1989 ARS N.Y./SPADEM. [this citation is from Torgovnick, 103]
  + In the public domain in the U.S.
* Paul Gauguin, *Nave Nave Moe* (“Fragrant Water,” 1894)
* 1926 Photograph, “Margaret Mead Sitting Between two Samoan Girls”
  + Courtesy the Library of Congress, Manuscript Collection.
  + Found image at this website: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead/field-samoa.html>

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