

# "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ART

Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern

**DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART**

Philip Morris Incorporated  
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Modern Western culture owes a spiritual debt to the tribal societies of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Their arts have broadly and profoundly enriched the vocabulary of twentieth-century painting and sculpture. This exhibition examines the influence of tribal art on modern art, the affinities they share, and the nature of modernist "primitivism" as a force in Western art over the past century.

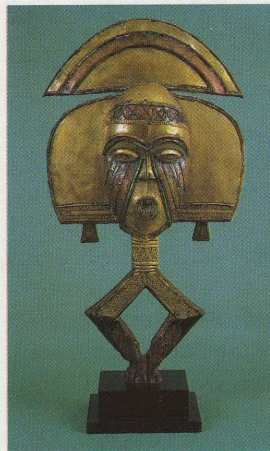
The word "primitive" may still have negative associations for some readers, but when Picasso declared that "primitive sculpture has never been surpassed," he used the word in another, wholly positive sense. His judgment reflects the revolutionary new outlook of those pioneer artists who, at the beginning of this century, opened Western eyes to the beauty, power, and subtlety of tribal arts—and made "primitive" a term of praise.



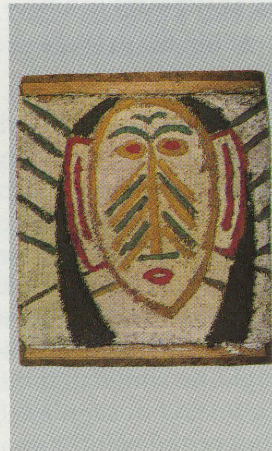
Constantin Brancusi. *Madame L.R.* (shown without base). 1914-18. Wood, c. 37" high. Private collection



Reliquary figure. Hongwe. Gabon. Wood, brass, and copper, 20 7/8" high. Private collection, Paris



Reliquary figure. Kota. Gabon. Wood, copper, and brass, 26 3/4" high. Private collection



Pablo Picasso. *Head*. 1907. Oil and sand on panel, 6 7/8 x 5 1/2". Collection Claude Picasso, Paris

The direct influence of tribal art on modern Western artists has been more extensive and more important than previously recognized. In illuminating that influence, our exhibition pays homage to two groups of creators. The impact of tribal art on Western culture first honors the great inventive powers of the tribal artists; their objects have transcended the contexts of their own societies, demolishing Western presumptions linking human potential to technological progress. It also honors the modern artists who subverted their own received traditions in order to touch the force of things radically unfamiliar. Through artistic response, they forged a bond between intelligences otherwise divided by all the barriers of language, belief, and social structure.

In order to assess the relationships between tribal and modern art, we must first appreciate how profoundly separate these two realms are, and especially how distant they appeared at the outset of our century. Nothing in Western (or Eastern) art prepared modern artists for the otherness of tribal art. Yet they were moved by it, and we are too, precisely because we see something of ourselves in it—a part of ourselves that Western culture had been unwilling to admit, not to say image, before the twentieth century.

This positive response is what we mean by "primitivism." The term "primitivism" does not refer to tribal art itself, but only to modern Western interest in it. Our exhibition thus focuses not on the origins and intrinsic meanings of tribal objects themselves, but on the ways these objects were understood and appreciated by modern artists. The artists who first recognized the power of tribal art generally did not know its sources or purposes. They sensed meanings through intuitive response to the objects, often with a "creative misunderstanding" of their forms and functions.

## "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART is divided into three sections:

### I. CONCEPTS

The first area of the exhibit stresses the basic concepts underlying the modern response to tribal art. Selected comparisons between modern and tribal objects probe the essential issues raised by the interaction of the two kinds of art. One of the illuminating aspects of this exhibit is its revelation of the number of different ways in which a modern artist might be stimulated by "primitive" art; it is not a question of simple influence or imitation.

Juxtaposed pairs or groups of works make this clear. Picasso's *Guitar*, for instance, has a startling resemblance to a Grebo mask from West Africa (similar to a mask Picasso owned), because both works use projecting cylindrical forms to represent, conceptually rather than realistically, a concave space. In Max Ernst's *Bird Head*, face and head are reduced to a flat square with slight projections, resembling an African mask from Upper Volta. Alberto Giacometti's elongated, thin figurative sculptures also echo tribal sculptures, without being in any sense imitations of them. These art works spring from the same formal approach and aesthetic spirit.

### II. HISTORY

The main part of the exhibition follows the historical impact of tribal art on modern artists, from Paul Gauguin at the turn of the century to the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s. In a rich and fascinating series of parallel creations, one may see examples of masks or sculptures owned by artists like Picasso; art of the kind Gauguin found when he settled in Tahiti; art seen at the Trocadero Museum in Paris (now the Musée de l'Homme); and other examples of tribal art known in the West in the first part of the 20th century. Here the centerpiece is Picasso's great painting of 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, which may be viewed together with the African masks Picasso might have seen when he painted it. Interestingly enough, the painting suggests other kinds of masks which Picasso could not have seen in Europe at that time; it is an example of inspiration and transformation, not lit-

eral imitation. Other comparisons in this part of the exhibit give one an idea of the creative stylizations, paralleling tribal art, which were made by Brancusi, Klee, Lipchitz, the Surrealists, the German Expressionists, Moore, and Giacometti, among others. Each comparison shows evocative similarities with African, Oceanic, American Indian and Eskimo works. One may see the attraction that African art, with its volumetric solidity and acceptance of the human figure, had for Cubist artists, in contrast to the Surrealist's interest in the more fantastic and ephemeral forms of Oceanic art.

### III. AFFINITIES

These historical comparisons illuminate the development of modern art, but a subtler relationship may be traced in works where there is no historical connection, but rather a parallel appearance, which is due to a similarity of interests. Modern artists in Europe or America experimented with ways of abstracting the human face and form, and these expressive simplifications of shape often resembled tribal sculptures without being directly influenced by them. The inventive freedom of "primitive" art was challenged by an equal freedom in the development of modern abstract art. The last area of this exhibit presents a group of tribal objects which have this sort of visual affinity to modern art. For instance, the release of psychological fantasies in art occurs in tribal art, such as in the highly expressive Eskimo masks, with their disturbing psychic content, and in the Surrealist art of the Spanish painter Juan Miro.

"The increasing knowledge of the thinking of so-called primitive peoples, during the past fifty years, has contributed a great deal to the change (in modern cultures)—especially the acquaintance with works of art made by these people... Their solutions and their ways of doing and making which first appeared to us very rough, are more clever than ours. It may be refinement, cerebrations, depth of mind, are on their side, not ours. Personally, I believe very much in values of "savagery": I mean, instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness."

Jean Dubuffet

The Museum of Modern Art  
September 27, 1984-January 15, 1985

The Detroit Institute of Arts  
February 27-May 19, 1985

Dallas Museum of Art  
June 23-September 1, 1985



*Front Cover*

(Left) Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (detail). 1907. Oil on canvas, 96 x 92". The Museum of Modern Art, New York; acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Photo: MOMA (Kate Keller)

(Right) Mbuya (sickness) mask. Pende. Zaire. Painted wood, fiber, and cloth, 10½" high. Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium. Photo: Bruno Piazza, Brussels

*Back Cover*

Mask. Baining. New Britain. Painted bark cloth, cane frame, 39" high. Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde. Photo: Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde (Brigitte Claassen)