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The Primitivism debate and Modern Art

Abstract

Supposedly ‘primitive’ works of art in their various forms always had a great appeal in Western culture. Since the eighteenth century (and also before) there has been a consistent tendency in European Art and Literature to attribute superior virtue to primitive people. In this paper I will introduce first the notion of primitivism and the theoretical aspects presented by two American scholars, Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas who became the pioneers of the history and theorisation of primitivism when they published their seminal work on Classical literature and philosophy, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, (1935).

I will also discuss the central question why modern artists turned to primitive art for inspiration. And I will be referring to the seminal work published by Robert Goldwater in 1938, *Primitivism in Modern Art*. Although Goldwater seemed to be more concerned

with the thematic approach, he stressed a common characteristic of primitivism in modern art, namely the search for 'simplicity'. The controversial exhibition, "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 helps us to understand better the difference between works created by the 'primitives' and the works made by modern artists within a different context. The 'Primitive' is not only found in modern art but also traced in other categories like the art of children, peasants, and the insane and even women.

The Primitivism Debate and Modern Art

We understand that the 'primitive' in its various forms influenced modern artists in many ways. The term 'Primitivism' which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, generally speaking, is about western constructions of 'primitive' societies and attitudes towards those cultures deemed to be relatively 'primitive'¹. My intention is not to offer a general survey on the history of 'Primitivism' but rather make use of the ideas provided by the main proponents of the 'Primitivism' debate. Before explaining how Primitivism is manifested in Modern Art, it is important to understand the notion of Primitivism and its implications in the history of ideas. We know that Primitivism promotes 'nature' over 'civilization'. It is a term that was used by historical and philosophical writers. Primitivism denotes an idea contrary to the social ills that accompany the 'civilizing' process.

Definition by Lovejoy and Boas

Two great literary theorists, Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, gave a significant universal definition of 'primitivism'. Their notable book *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* was meant to be the first volume of a four-part series of books covering the history of primitivism and related ideas. Unfortunately the other three volumes were never published because of the outbreak of World War II. Their initial research, which is

found in this book, is based on the concepts of primitivism and anti-primitivism of Classical times. Lovejoy and Boas first described the term “primitivism” as “a name for two distinct tendencies in human thought,” divided into two aspects: Chronological primitivism and Cultural primitivism.²

Chronological primitivism is “a kind of philosophy of history, a theory, or a customary assumption, as to the time – past or present or future – at which the most excellent condition of human life, or the best state of the world in general, must be supposed to occur.”³ In a few words, we can say, it is the best time in human existence, like a “Golden Age”. Colin Rhodes argues that Lovejoy and Boas’ definition of Chronological primitivism confuses the issue.⁴ Rhodes comments:

That the ‘best state of the world’ will not be judged to be in the present by the primitivist for in this situation there can only be cultural contentment. Furthermore, the utopian dream of a ‘best state’ in the future should only be regarded as primitivist when this future state is regarded as a ‘return’ to some previous state of grace.⁵

In fact I argue that Chronological primitivism signifies the belief that ancient or prehistoric times were better than modern times. On the other hand the meaning of Cultural primitivism as defined by Lovejoy and Boas is: “the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it. It is the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or in all respects is a more desirable life.”⁶ Thus Cultural primitivism idealizes the natural life of primitive peoples. Philosophical to political writings about primitivism date back from pre-Socratics, medieval, Jewish and Christian theologians up to 19th –20th century social theorists, with well-known writers like Rousseau, Thoreau, Lao Tze, Montaigne, and Dryden, just to name a few. The concept of the ‘Noble Savage’ emerges in such writings claiming that the human being in his ‘original state’ is more close to nature. 18th century writers believed in the inherent goodness of the human being, asserting that primitive peoples’ lives were not complicated by the effects of civilization.⁷ These ideas were being felt also in the Romantic movement and the writings of early twentieth century writers like for example

the work of C.B. H.N. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage* (1928), which expresses the romanticism of naturalism.

Nature, Soft and Hard Primitivism

The popularity of Primitivism amongst writers and artists is due to the great yearning for the love of nature. Lovejoy and Boas gave a variety of meanings about 'Nature'. They first establish a discourse on how 'nature' is valued as a term that explains the best condition of human life.

The history of primitivism is in great part a phase of a larger historic tendency which is one of the strangest, most potent and most persistent factors of Western thought – the use of the term 'nature' to express the standard of human values, the identification of the good with that which is 'natural' or 'according to nature.'⁸

Lovejoy and Boas further explain that the life of the primitive peoples represents 'the state of nature.' They also point out that the term 'nature' has an "extraordinary multiplicity of meanings," found "in its normative uses."⁹ "Cultural as well as chronological primitivism thus seemed to be in accord with the norm of 'nature'; all man's alterations of or additions to the 'natural' order of things are changes for the worse."¹⁰ This way of thinking, that is when artificial or unnatural intervention by the human being is imposed on nature, the result is the loss of the primal conditions of humankind. It is argued that the best time "of excellence or happiness in man's life existed at the beginning of history."¹¹ This is of course a general aspect of chronological primitivism. Lovejoy and Boas later describe two types of cultural primitivism giving them the names of 'soft' and 'hard' primitivism.¹² It has always been explained that the life of the primitive human being was "easier and harder than that of the civilized." The term 'Soft' primitivism refers to a type of primitive life that promotes natural life, free from the constraints of the civilized process. Thus easy and pleasurable life, "characterized by a degree of physical hardship; if happier on the whole, it has fewer 'enjoyments' and fewer 'goods' in the economic sense." The primitive "wanted less and therefore knew how to be content with little."¹³ (this characterises the life of the Golden Age) On the other hand 'hard' primitivism is the harsh response to the corruptions of civilization by the primitive human beings, well disciplined and strict. Lovejoy and Boas

gave an example of this tendency referring to a later type of primitivism of the classical period describing the life of the Scythians and Getae. These ancient people were rude, hardy fellows to whom 'Nature' was no gentle or indulgent mother. Their food did not drop into their laps, they were obliged to defend themselves against predatory animals, they were not exempt from the infirmities of the age; and they extolled for the fewness of their desires and consequent indifference to the luxuries and even the comforts of the civilized life.¹⁴

These two aspects of primitivism refer to the idea of the 'noble savage.' I remark and emphasize again the idea of the Rousseauian ideal of the Noble Savage which primitive society more attuned with nature, therefore better for human life and thus much better than modern society. Since the eighteenth century there has been this persistent tendency in European Art and Literature promoting the superior virtue of primitive life. Writers and artists were experiencing a kind of nostalgia that was reflected powerfully in the arts.

Primitivism as described in Modern Art

In his seminal book, a classical study, published for the first time in 1938, *Primitivism in Modern Art* Robert Goldwater gives one of the earliest definitions of 'Primitivism', describing how modern art was profoundly influenced by 'Primitive Art'. His study is considered the first attempt in Art History which shows the importance of the influence of primitive art in modern art. He divides 'Primitivism' in categories: 'romantic' (Gauguin and the Fauves), 'emotional' (the Brücke and the Blue Rider), and 'intellectual' or 'formal' (Picasso) and 'primitivism of the subconscious' (Dada and Surrealism).¹⁵ Goldwater's analysis of Modern Art is centred on a thematic approach rather than an historical aspect.¹⁶ Although there seem to be a difference between each category, one can understand that "for the modern artist the primitiveness of these different arts lay in the common quality of simplicity."¹⁷ It is the 'simplicity' that is found in primitive art that influenced and attracted so much the modern artist to work in a non academic manner. Modern art rejected the sophistication of the past five centuries of painting and sculpture, the pursuit of realistic effects and classical beauty, and instead identified with

the art of the primitive artists of Africa and Oceania. This great lure for simplicity has even been felt since the beginning of the Nineteenth century. William Rubin states:

Nineteenth-century primitivist painters had appreciated pre-Renaissance Western styles for their “simplicity” and “sincerity” – which they saw in the absence of complex devices of illusionist lighting and perspective – and for their vigor and expressive power, qualities these artists missed in the official art of their own day, which was based on Classical and academic models.¹⁸

The escape from a Classical art was found to be an attraction to the early modern artists especially those who were exposing themselves to ‘primitive’ art. “Simplicity” was an idea about which Picasso had frequent discussions with William Rubin.¹⁹ Mostly Picasso referred to his own work and that of other contemporaries of his connecting their work with “art negre.”²⁰ Simplicity “was not just the absence of elaborate effects but economy that implied the distillation of complexities.”²¹ Picasso’s idea was that artists had forgotten how to be simple and that simplicity was found in the art of the Primitive people. He also confirmed this with his closest friend Jaime Sabartes.²² So artists like Picasso became interested in primitive sculpture for its simplicity, which was lacking in classical works.

The story that describes the first interest of modern artists in the ‘primitive’ is well known. A Fang mask was given to Maurice de Vlaminck in 1905. One of his fellow friends, André Derain, (a Fauve) saw this mask in his studio and he was so impressed with its form that he bought it. Later Derain showed the mask to Picasso and Matisse, and spread its fame until Ambroise Vollard eventually cast a bronze edition from it. The influence this piece and others had on the modern artists was immense and immediate, visible in many famous works. Although today this historical episode is acceptable, debates are still going on about the ‘discovery’ of African sculpture by artists at the beginning of the twentieth century.²³ We have also to consider that this interest in primitive art was perhaps the result of the opening of the first ethnographic museum in Paris on the 23 January 1878 (Musée Ethnographique des Missions Scientifiques). The establishment of this museum played an important role in the evolution of Paris modernism.²⁴ Therefore accessibility to primitive artefacts became easier for artists.

Also one must not forget the Darwinian theories that stimulated a great interest in primitive societies. Many writers debated the idea that artistic Primitivism “deals exclusively with Western responses to tribal cultures and specifically with artistic insights gained through the experience of primitive art.”²⁵ Although the construct of the ‘primitive’ in a Western sense, gives a deprived approach, and contrary ideas, one cannot leave out the effect it left on our consciousness. Accepting the fact that “artistic creativity originates deep within the psyche of the artist,”²⁶ it is also acknowledged that the art of the primitives was without any form of repression. Therefore it “emerges directly and spontaneously from psychological drives.”²⁷ The ‘Civilized’ artist unconsciously was always attracted to the art of the ‘Primitive’ and sought to find the missing qualities in Western art that are only manifested in Primitive Art.²⁸

The MoMA exhibition in New York

The now historical, important exhibition that was organised at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 is worth giving attention. William Rubin who was then at that time director of the museum (1973-1988) worked for six years on the project: *"PRIMITIVISM" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Apart from the normal brochure published when the exhibition was opened, two large volume catalogue edited by William Rubin himself were also published. The catalogue included various essays by different scholars together with Rubin’s long introduction to ‘Modern Primitivism’ and a study on Picasso. Perhaps the most interesting part in these volumes was that of Kirk Varnedoe who later became director of MOMA in 1988.²⁹ The aim of the publication and the exhibition was to show that the interest which those early artists had in the ‘primitive’ was still growing stronger, and influencing others. The exhibition included works by the ‘Primitivists of Modern Art’: namely Gauguin, Matisse and the Fauves, Picasso, Brancusi, works by the German Expressionists, Italian Painting (mainly Carlo Carrà), works from Paris and London (Modigliani, Lipchitz, Epstein and Gaudier-Brzeska, American Art, Leger, Paul Klee, Giacometti, works from the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, Henry Moore, Abstract Expressionists and Contemporary works. The ‘Tribal’ works came from North America, Oceania and Africa. Although this

exhaustive exhibition seemed to be a success, for some scholars it created controversial debates on certain issues, like “the power struggle within the modern art scene”³⁰, the colonialism question (the way the West acquired primitive art)³¹ and other controversies of a rather political nature. Although I am not taking up these issues in detail it should be noted that it appeared to have created harsh criticism in the way that the idea of ‘Primitivism’ was described in the exhibition. The first aspect which was very noticeable was that most works were paired together displayed side by side: the so called ‘affinity pieces’ or ‘tribal’ works with European art. The best example exhibited in this manner is surely the major work by Picasso, *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) shown together with an African mask. Although “Rubin had a clear interest in how we perceive this painting and its similarities to primitive masks”,³² not everybody accepted this idea. Marianna Torgovnick in her book *Gone Primitive* remarked:

Much criticism focused on what the exhibition said or did not say about the primitive objects displayed as art. Many observed that the choice to exhibit primitive sources or ‘affinity-pieces’ side by side with Western works jarred and offended.³³

The exhibits gave the impression that they were equal as ‘Art’. Not everybody agreed with this. Torgovnick argued “primitive artefacts in a sense lost their authenticity as soon as the West got access to them.”³⁴ Although William Rubin mentions in his catalogue the ‘colonial context’ under which the West acquired primitive art, she criticised him heavily for transforming historical facts in his own way, Torgovnick quoted Rubin saying that “Picasso and the modernists are unblemished heroes and in which primitives should be happy and willing to become part of Western art history.”³⁵ On the other hand Rubin argued that political and ethnographic concerns could be omitted from the consideration of non-Western art. One has to be careful here not to categorize completely primitive art with that of the Western modern artists. It does not mean that ‘primitive’ works were made under the same circumstances and conditions like Western art.

The second aspect one has to consider is also the social content why these ‘primitive’ works were made. There seemed to be a wrong interpretation of these works, which were

closely associated by Westerners as objects that express horror, fear and sexuality.³⁶ Due to colonial thinking primitive art was given a false impression. This resulted in an exaggerated interpretation by Western artists. Even when describing the famous work by Picasso, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, Rubin falls into the trap of describing the African faces as the expression of “the ‘barbaric’ character of pure sexuality”³⁷ Although Rubin in his writing explains at length the idea that the West had a common misreading of primitive art, he fails to be consistent.³⁸

With all its controversies the MOMA exhibition served as an impetus to make people aware of the way Western artists were making use of ‘primitive’ models as their ideal.

One may conclude that today there is a wider definition of artistic primitivism. It is not only seen in the modern artistic process which happened since the eighteenth century and the art movements that emerged during nineteenth and twentieth centuries but one may also include the ‘primitive’ found in the works of peasants, children, the insane and even women.³⁹ First we have to analyse the characteristics of the qualitative differences of the works of art. Colin Rhodes who published the book *Primitivism and Modern Art* in 1994 believes that “in modernist painting and sculpture we must look for evidence of primitivism in the objects themselves; that is in works of art.”⁴⁰ It is extremely important therefore to understand not just the intention of the artist but also to try to find ‘evidence of primitivism’ in the visual aspect of the work. According to Rhodes, “the ‘primitive’ is found wherever it is looked for.”⁴¹ It is the “interest in the creative process that is more important than form”⁴² that makes the ‘primitive’ distinguishable in modern art.

¹ The term ‘primitive’ is a western construct of “someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared.” RHODES, Colin, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 1994, p. 13.

² LOVEJOY, Arthur, O, and BOAS, George, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, 1935, (issue 1997) p. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ RHODES, Colin, *Primitivism Reexamined – Construction of the “Primitive” in Modernist Visual Art*, 1993, Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, p.74.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 74 - 75.

⁶ Ibid., p.7.

⁷ The term ‘Noble Savage’ was coined by 18th century social philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his famous essay *Social Contract*, 1762.

⁸ LOVEJOY, Arthur, O, and BOAS, George, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, 1935, (issue 1997) pp. 11,12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 111,112.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p.10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 10,11.

¹⁵ GOLDWATER, Robert, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 1986, see chapters 3,4,5,and 6.

¹⁶ RHODES, Colin, *Primitivism Reexamined – Construction of the “Primitive” in Modernist Visual Art*, 1993, Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex. P. 77, unpublished.

¹⁷ GOLDWATER, Robert, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 1986, p.252.

¹⁸ RUBIN, William, “*Primitivism” In 20th Century Art*, 1984. p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.75, notes on introduction 28.

²⁰ Ibid.,

²¹ Ibid.,

²² Ibid., see also Sabartes, *Picasso, An Intimate Portrait*, note 20 p. 213.

²³ RHODES, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 1994, p.111.

²⁴ PAUDRAT, Jean-Louis, *From Africa*, in Rubin, William, “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, 1984, Vol. I, p.125.

²⁵ RHODES, Colin, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 1994, p. 17.

²⁶ PRICE, Sally, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 1991 p. 32.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

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²⁹ VARNEDO, Kirk, *Gauguin; Abstract Expressionism; Contemporary Explorations*, in Rubin, William, “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, 1984, Vol. I, pp.179-209, Vol. II, pp. 615-685.

³⁰ TORGOVNICK, Marianna, *Gone Primitive, Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, 1990, p. 120.

³¹ Ibid., p. 125.

³² TORGOVNIICK, Marianna, *Gone Primitive, Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, 1990, p.119.

³³ Ibid., p.121.

³⁴ Ibid., p.125.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Torgovnick’s discussion on the interpretation of ‘Primitive art’ by Westerners, as objects of violence and sexuality in chapter 6 pages: 126-128, *Gone Primitive, Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, 1990.

³⁷ RUBIN, William, “*Primitivism” In 20th Century Art*, 1984. p. 254.

³⁸ TORGOVNIICK, Marianna, *Gone Primitive, Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, 1990, p.126.

³⁹ RHODES, Colin, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 1994, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.79.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.