

Michael Peppiatt

THE
MAKING
OF
MODERN
ART

Selected Writings

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The Trouble with 'Primitivism'

To Thomas McEvilley
(1939–2013)

This is a subject that I have alluded to at some length in the Introduction to this book: if I don't seem able to leave it alone, it's because it marked a definitive caesura in my professional and my private life.

I hadn't the faintest idea when I wrote the following review of the *Primitivism* exhibition at MoMA in New York some thirty years ago that I was about to stir up a hornets' nest in the art world and precipitate a deep crisis in my own life. When *Connaissance des arts*, the Paris-based art magazine I had been writing for regularly for several years, suggested I go to New York in advance of the show's opening to discuss it with its eminent curator, William Rubin, I was delighted. Not only was the theme of the show, as well as a trip to New York, very alluring, but I was also flattered to be the first to comment on a ground-breaking international event. It was one of those heady moments when you felt everything was going your way.

Far from a professional triumph, it proved to be my nemesis. Rubin received me cordially enough, described the aims of his show and gave me the catalogue, then still in proof form. I responded enthusiastically. It was only when I was back in Paris and began to look closely at the various pairings of 'primitive' carvings and modernist masterpieces that the seeds of doubt were sown. Reading Rubin's catalogue essay only served to turn the fledgling doubt into a nagging scepticism. How could one pair a tall, thin African walking staff with a tall, thin Giacometti figure simply on the basis that the sculptor might have seen the piece at some early point in his development? The more I pondered the premises of *Primitivism*, the less convinced I became, and the more I questioned the effect the pairings would have on the many unprepared, unquestioning visitors who would be tempted to believe that seeing an African staff (if indeed he had seen it) had led Giacometti to create stick-like figures. Affinities, such as they were, had been presented as influences, which was quite a different matter. Moreover, the tribal art itself risked being seen as a kind of side-show to modernism.

Not being the kind of critic who relishes doing a hatchet job, and also because I had a residual admiration for the extraordinary visual impact of so many African and European masterpieces, I wrote what I thought

was a balanced review, making my reservations known in a deliberately unaggressive way (particularly when compared to the many other, bitterly hostile reviews that came later). No sooner had the piece been published when it seemed all hell had broken loose. MoMA were holding an emergency midnight meeting, the editor of *Connaissance des arts* called to tell me, in order to decide what action to take, while hiring two teams of lawyers, one in New York, one in Paris, to build a case against me. They would be taking a full-page advertisement in the *International Herald Tribune*, he further informed me, to denounce me as in bad faith and in the pay of African art dealers.

I could hardly believe what had happened, but I won't pretend that I wasn't deeply shaken and worried. I was already plagued by guilt and anxiety. My father had just died, thus leaving the issues that had divided us unresolved, and my personal life was in a shambles because I was trying to leave a much older lover, not really for anyone else but because I knew instinctively it was time for my life to take a different direction. On top of this, what became known as the 'Rubin affair' sent me reeling into such a loss of self-confidence and self-respect that I had a complete nervous breakdown, unable to eat or sleep. It took a year, with the help of a few doctors and several staunch friends, to overcome the crisis.

In the event, although *Connaissance des arts* washed their hands of me and suggested I get a lawyer of my own to take up my defence, Rubin published an angry rebuttal and would have pursued the matter further had he not by this time been inundated by other, far fiercer criticism from right across the critical spectrum (and most pertinently and durably from American art critic Thomas McEvilley, to whose memory I dedicate this essay). Under this covering fire, I slunk away to probe rather than lick my wounds. After the most distressing and painful months of my life, stumbling through a darkness that I believed would lead to madness and death, I eventually recovered. I was a changed man. The insouciance of my earlier life had vanished (not so surprisingly since I was in my mid-forties). Having survived gave me a drive I hadn't known before, and in fairly short order I acquired and relaunched the magazine *Art International* from my bachelor quarters, then married, had children and, after an absence of twenty-eight years, returned to live in London. Thus the run-in with Rubin, which had caused me such harm, in the long run changed my life for the better. But that is another story. The once inflammatory text below now seems pretty tame to me.

The story of modern art has been told so often that these days we listen to it as distractedly as children listening to a familiar fairy-tale. Since we know whole passages by heart, there is a ritualistic pleasure in hearing the same litany of

great names, the same saga of great aesthetic deeds done. But with it comes the frustration of watching the mould of accepted opinion set ever more firmly around events that are still alive – decreeing by date and quotation that they happened thus and thus, and not otherwise. Rapid ossification ends, of course, by excluding much of a period's real vitality: its quirks and contradictions, its doubts and subterfuges. In the process, certain pronouncements or interpretations become so hallowed, so much part of official dogma, that they are no longer even questioned. Consequently, occasions to re-examine these received articles of faith are to be seized on.

An unusually good opportunity of this kind seems to be offered by the large exhibition, entitled *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art*, about to open at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. By juxtaposing 'primitive' and modern Western art, the exhibition aims to explore in depth the influence that tribal works have had on the development of our own art from Gauguin to the present day. Thus some two hundred of the exhibits are African, Oceanic or Native American in origin, while the remaining 150 come from Europe or, in a few instances, the USA. The show has been arranged so that the different cultures can be compared or contrasted to maximum effect – in certain cases to the extent of presenting them in pairs, with a Picasso head set beside a Nigerian mask, for instance, or a Kenneth Noland twinned with a figure in painted wood from Papua.

But the show is far more ambitious and controversial than such a bald summary would indicate. To begin with, by its choice and pairing of objects, as well as in the 750-page book that serves as a catalogue,¹ it sets out to define the constantly shifting concept and implications of 'primitivism'. This is in itself a fascinating topic, and in his Introduction William Rubin does it justice.²

The very notion of 'primitive' art, as he explains, has an outstanding record of arbitrariness behind it. In the mid-nineteenth century, it denoted primarily pre-Renaissance Italian and Flemish art; but it was also used, with exemplary vagueness, in reference not only to the Byzantine and Romanesque styles, but arts, from the Peruvian to the Javanese. Later in the century, the term had become so woolly that Van Gogh could laud ancient Egyptian art as 'primitive'; and Gauguin, a self-styled 'primitive', used the word to describe every art that attracted him, from the Persian to the Polynesian. In fact, only from 1900–07, when Vlaminck, Derain, Matisse and Picasso 'discovered' African and Oceanic carvings, did the term start to take on its present-day (or 'modernist') connotations.

Since then, another problem has overshadowed its usage: the word's pejorative implications. 'Primitive' can mean 'savage', 'uncivilised', or at best 'underdeveloped'. As the power and beauty of tribal art becomes more widely recognised and its influence on the West more apparent, and as the ethnocentric attitudes of former colonial nations are challenged, embarrassment over calling such works 'primitive' grows. But the old Western attitude, by which these arts were considered as curiosities or worthless (Ruskin ruled there was 'no art in the whole of Africa, Asia or America'), dies hard. Although the Musée d'Ethnographie

du Trocadéro in Paris was rebaptised the Musée de l'Homme in 1937, such important holdings of African and Oceanic as La Rochelle's are still displayed in a natural history museum; and no satisfactory substitute for the term 'primitive' has been found. On the other hand, some of the foremost museums in the world, such as the Metropolitan in New York, have given over an entire wing to their collections of primitive art. From these clearly conflicting pieces of evidence, one can see that Western attitudes are likely to continue to fluctuate for quite some time.

But the exhibition at MoMA is above all concerned with establishing, or at least suggesting, which pieces of primitive art have influenced which Western ones, in what way and to what extent. The museum's press office claims that it is 'the first exhibition to juxtapose tribal and modern objects in the light of informed art history'; the huge book that serves as the exhibition catalogue³ continues in the same vein: 'No pivotal topic in twentieth-century art has received less serious attention', and emphasises the paucity of written material on the subject.⁴ The main reason for this state of affairs, Rubin suggests, is that there are so few art historians who can pretend to expertise in both tribal and modern Western art. Ignorance of facts and 'unwarranted assumptions', he continues, have prevailed; and as memorable proof of this he attests that 'none of the four types of masks proposed by eminent scholars as possible sources for *Les Femmes d'Alger* could have been seen by Picasso in Paris as early as 1907 when he painted the picture'. Thus presented, the case is attractive and at first sight convincing. But, as I hope to show later in this article, other, more profound reasons – which the present exhibition chooses to disregard – have made art historians extremely wary of the subject.

Whatever the final view of the MoMA's undertaking (and it is already considered highly controversial in expert circles), there can be no doubt that its theme is exquisitely tantalising. To go back to the origins of modernism and establish sources of inspiration that others have not been able to see is the most alluring prospect. It is quite as hazardous, too. But that has not prevented the large team at work on the exhibition from plunging into all aspects of the subject and coming up with a catalogue that will be the work of reference in the field for years to come. Even if some of its major claims are already open to refutation, the catalogue will at the very least provide the ground on which to build future scholarship.

There can also be no doubt that, in purely visual terms, the exhibition will be breathtaking. What, after all, could be more seductive than masterpieces of several, widely differing cultures apparently resembling each other? When a tall, slender tribal carving is set beside a tall, slender Giacometti figure, a magical tension is obtained, stirring memories of Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious' and creating the impression that one is at the heart of the mystery of universal form. In point of fact, however, one is merely at the heart of a coincidence. Although the figure belonged to a collector in Paris and the exhibition catalogue suggests that Giacometti 'probably' saw it, there is no proof of this and even less

of a possible 'influence'. Thus the danger of the MoMA's exhibition is that it often suggests as *fact* what in reality is only *supposition*.

A more subtle example of this can be found in an especially pretty 'pair': Klee's *Mask of Fear* and a Zuni (Native American) war god. The Zuni figure belongs to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin; Klee visited the museum in 1906, and possibly – though only possibly – on subsequent occasions. The two images have certain comparable features, notably the arrow protruding from the head, and the absence of a mouth. On this basis, William Rubin says that he is 'convinced that Klee's image contains a recollection, conscious or unconscious, of the Zuni sculpture'. But this is guesswork, however inspired, and clearly tendentious. The Klee figure was painted in 1932, twenty-six years after his one known visit to the Berlin museum. In that long interim, Klee had produced several thousand images and had certainly looked at virtually everything under the sun, from minerals to children's drawings. Who can say, on such flimsy evidence, what went on in his mind – whether conscious or unconscious?

This brings us to the central problem underlying such attributions of 'influence'. A creative imagination functions in such curious and unexpected ways as to elude analysis of this kind. Twentieth-century artists in particular, with their acceptance of unconscious impulse and the infinite variety of images in reproduction at their disposal, draw from so many sources that even they would often be hard put to say what had influenced them at such and such a moment. Moreover, the artists – who are the only oracles in these matters – tend not to reveal their sources from an understandable dislike of seeing their work reduced to a kind of recipe in which they had taken a little of this and a little of that.

Understandably, too, art historians are constantly on the lookout for clues that will throw fresh light on the genesis of a work. But as soon as they depart from verifiable fact and rely on intuition (becoming 'history artists' more than art historians), hazards attend their every deduction.

It is for these reasons, surely, that no comprehensive exhibition on this seductive theme has been undertaken before. One leading ethnologist, who is also an authority on modern art, put it in a nutshell for me when he referred to the subject as 'taboo'; and two prominent experts on African art with whom I discussed the problem agree that stylistic comparisons between cultures as different as tribal African and modern European often obfuscate as much as they reveal. This becomes especially evident in the exhibition when, in a final large section, comparisons are drawn between contemporary Western artistic phenomena, notably earthworks, environment and performance art, and 'the organizational patterns of tribal and prehistoric societies'. In itself, the enquiry is a fascinating one, just as the exhibition organisers' desire to take their 'primitivist' theme to its furthest limits is, in itself, admirable. But the cross-references prove so diffuse as to lack any real coherence. Thus Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, which consists of four hundred steel poles set over a vast rectangular area in New Mexico, evokes the following comment in the catalogue: 'The measured

grid is characteristic of contemporary rationalised aesthetics, but the sense of place engendered, and especially the earth-to-sky relationship of the work, has affinities with Primitive sites and systems of nature worship.' More ingenious than convincing, too, are the reasons that have been found to yoke a 'soul-catcher' from the Cook Islands (used by tribal 'sacred men' to trap the souls of those who offended them) with a minimalist work by Eva Hesse. Rubin seems closer here to a game of lookalikes rather than to a meaningful parallel between cultures.

It is impossible in a single essay to cover the scope and complexity of '*Primitivism*' in *20th Century Art* satisfactorily. If I have tended to dwell on its dubious or negative aspects, it is because they are what is least readily apparent in this sumptuous display of styles. I think it necessary to underline them because they are unlikely to strike anyone who has not had the opportunity to study the material in some depth and consult independent specialists. Without a vigorous warning of this kind, unprepared visitors are likely to take the show too much at face value and come to quite erroneous conclusions.

This said, I should also like to emphasise that the exhibition's shortcomings stem from a passionate desire not only to discover but to convince. And there can be no denying that its combination of scholarship and imaginative daring is highly persuasive – and will eventually lead no doubt to a more objective enquiry. Should *Primitivism*'s firework display of learning and ingenuity draw not only admiration but also well-founded criticism, it will have opened up a full-scale debate on the subject and so served its purpose most successfully.

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1. William Rubin, '*Primitivism*' in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, exh. cat., 2 vols, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.
 2. Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, and curator of the exhibition in collaboration with Professor Kirk Varnedoe of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.
 3. The catalogue contains a large number of essays by various specialists on different aspects of 'primitivism'. Professor Varnedoe's study of Gauguin is particularly interesting.
 4. Only two works are listed as 'instructive'. One is Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1938, and the other Jean Laude, *La Peinture française (1905–14) et l'art nègre*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1968.