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The Influence of Primitive Art

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The Influence of

Primitive Art

*Address by Professor Rupert Kilgore
Director of the School of Art
on the occasion of the
Annual Century Club Dinner
held on May 12, 1964.*

*Mr. Kilgore had been chosen by the faculty
as recipient of the
Century Club Award for 1964.*

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Bloomington, Illinois

THE INFLUENCE OF PRIMITIVE ART

The only completely positive prediction we can make concerning the painting and sculpture of tomorrow is that it will be different from the painting and sculpture of today. The history of art is a history of changing styles. Since works of serious art express the epoch that produced them, variation in artistic styles is no broader and no more rapid than variations in other facets of a culture. Innovations in art styles do not occur because of fashion but because changing social conditions bring new demands. Better knowledge of the social conditions and demands of a given period lead to a better understanding of the arts of that period. The converse is also true.

One of the major influences upon painting and sculpture of this century has been the art of primitive peoples. Today, we are able to study the rise of that influence more objectively and we are in a better position to understand the social conditions that invited it as well as the various directions the influence took. We must understand that such an influence could not appear until the conditions surrounding the artists demanded it.

The arts of certain primitive peoples had been known by Europeans since the late Renaissance but had been regarded as mere curiosities. While visiting Brussels in 1520, Albrecht Dürer, the most important print-maker of his day, saw a collection of gifts sent by Montezuma to the King of Spain. Dürer wrote in his diary: "Then I saw the things which were brought to the King out of the New Land Of Gold . . . every kind of wondrous thing . . . all sorts of marvelous objects which are much more beautiful to behold than things spoken of in fairy tales. In all the days of my life I have seen nothing which so fills my heart with joy, for I beheld wondrous artful things and I marveled over the subtle genius of those men in strange countries." Although Dürer saw these objects with the eye of an artist, there is no evidence in his later work of any influence. This is true because he found no similarity between the culture of the Incas and the culture of his own time and place.

During the eighteenth century Captain Cook brought back to Europe many primitive artifacts from islands in the south Pacific and the north-west coast of North America. Nineteenth century missionaries in all primitive areas were exhorting their new converts to destroy their false gods. At the same time they themselves were collecting these objects and sending them home for safe keeping. Because of certain attitudes that had carried over from the Enlightenment, these were still regarded as unusual curiosities. When the idea of progress meant that anything that superseded something else was automatically better, people saw nothing esthetic in primitive art. As interest in ethnology increased during the nineteenth century, works of primitive art appeared in the ethnographic sections of the large international expositions. These were held in London in 1851 and 1887 and in Paris in 1854 and 1878--culminating in the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889, where Van Gogh and Gauguin first experienced primitive art. However, most Europeans still took a limited and chauvinistic attitude toward these primitive artifacts. Under

such conditions, serious artists found little need for any influences from the primitive. But as Darwin's ideas concerning biological evolution spread, men realized that many of his theories could be applied to social evolution and there came the realization that primitive cultures of the world had certain aspects in common with the much earlier cultures in Europe. This theory was supported by the discovery of prehistoric cave paintings and fertility fetishes in France, Spain, and Austria. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans and Americans had developed a more sympathetic understanding of primitive cultures and were beginning to see these people as human beings. Some artists of the time searched more deeply and found certain characteristics in primitive art that could make a positive contribution to their own art. We now know that the two most important contributions were: honesty of expression and truth to materials.

All five of the Post-Impressionists—Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec—were escapists in a sense. The industrial revolution had brought many workers from the country into the already-crowded cities, scientific progress and materialism had weakened organized religion and the kind of art demanded by the academy was thin, meaningless, and academic. Seurat shut himself in his studio and locked the door. Toulouse-Lautrec lived in the "demi-monde" apart from his aristocratic friends and relatives. While artists from most countries were struggling to get to Paris, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin left it. Gauguin travelled to the South Seas and lived in a native village in Tahiti. Van Gogh went to Arles and Cézanne to Aix-en-Provence—both small country towns in the south of France. Each of the five, in his own way, wanted to escape from what he felt were influences detrimental to serious art and at the same time have the opportunity to develop a personal means of expression that would help him find his own esthetic and spiritual synthesis. Strangely enough, Gauguin was the only one of the five directly influenced by primitive art but not by the art of Tahiti. The exotic color and rhythms that developed in his paintings came chiefly from the jungle environment and the natural mode of living of the Tahitians. His primitive influence came from Egyptian paintings he had seen in the Louvre in Paris.

For the past five hundred years, painting in Europe had changed its style slowly with each new movement evolving from or rebelling against the preceding movement. It seems strange that suddenly around 1900, painters and sculptors should choose to find their influences in the extremely different primitive art. However, this was not the first time foreign influence had appeared in western Europe. The eighteenth century had seen a strong invasion of Chinese porcelains, textiles, and lacquer-work which became popular in the decoration of interiors. Many designers imitated these imported products to produce decorative items. But there is no Oriental influence in the serious art of the period. By the 1870's, soon after Japan was opened to western trade, colored wood-cuts from that country were flowing into the art markets of Europe. These prints were purchased by and exerted an influence upon the work of Whistler, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Deep space in

these prints was controlled more by visual than by illusionistic means. For the first time since the fifteenth century, painters recovered a sense of the two-dimensional picture plane upon which they worked. This resulted in more interest in shapes as shapes and colors as colors. The Japanese influence made it easier for the still more strange and exotic primitive work to influence painting and sculpture of this century.

Although the Post-Impressionists were not influenced by primitive art, their attitudes revealed a deeply-felt need for a more sincere and less artificial means of expression. Later, when Matisse, Rouault, and Vlaminck began to see the sculptures from Negro Africa and the South Seas as works of art rather than exotic curiosities, they realized that the creators of these works were sincere and completely unself-conscious. They began to combine the flat bright colors of Gauguin and Van Gogh with the simplification found in primitive art to reach new heights of personal expression. These men first exhibited as a group in the Salon d'Automne in 1905. Because of their bright colors and freely distorted drawing, they soon became known as "Les Fauves"—"the Wild Beasts".

The new primitive influence caught on rapidly in Germany. By 1900, the younger painters in that country resented strongly the academic pressure of official art to keep them working in the style of nineteenth century classicism and romanticism. When Nolde, Kirchner, and Schmidt-Rottluff organized a movement called the "Junge Kunst" ("Art of Youth"), many members of the younger generation joined it. Most of the group had already been introduced to African Negro sculpture and the work of Van Gogh and Gauguin. They soon developed an interest in the primitive qualities in the art of the South Seas, of Paleolithic man, and German Gothic woodcuts. Historically, German art has always tended to be introspective, mystical and soul-searching. With the new influence of the exotic and strange, which was much more sympathetic to the German temperament, the movement we know as "German Expressionism" caught on rapidly after 1905 and continued to be the prevailing style in that country until the rise of Adolph Hitler.

When Emil Nolde—one of Germany's leading Expressionists—visited New Guinea, he discovered a kind of primitive art of which he wrote: "It reveals an absolute originality and the intensive and often grotesque expression of force and life in the simplest form." After his return to Germany, he realized that the art of children usually revealed the same kind of spontaneous, original, and subjective attitudes that he had found in primitive art. As a result, the art of children became another influence in the work of the Expressionists. Matisse once said that he was trying to see the world as a child sees it. He was not trying to paint as a child paints but to experience the same visual excitement and wonder that is so typical of a child's response to his surroundings. Among the Germans, Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner, Nolde, and Klee all worked at times with the simplified forms and rather awkward drawings that are found in the work of children. This is particularly true of Nolde. However, when we compare their work with the drawings and paintings of children, the difference is readily perceived. Behind the work of the adult painters, we find a mature mind and mature feelings. Children merely record in

a highly personal way what they see and know of the world around them. Adult artists express what they feel in response to the world they live in.

An interesting side-effect of this emphasis on children's art has been the increased public interest in the work of all children during this century. Exhibitions of children's art are featured regularly in many museums and galleries in Europe and in this country. For many years, art teachers in public schools tried to teach children to work in an adult way—thus, training them to be artists. Today, most art teachers are interested in art as another means to the full development of the whole child. As the teacher gives him freedom of expression, he builds confidence in himself as a unique creative individual and he is helped mightily in his search for identity. Incidentally, he may become an artist.

In the art of children and the works of primitive man, the artists of this century found an honesty of expression that became an important influence in the development of the style we know as Expressionism both in France and in Germany. Most primitive art has a practical reason for its existence—it is a means to another end. Usually this purpose is religious with men seeing the various idols of wood and stone as embodying their various gods. In the presence of these objects, they have an experience of both immanence and transcendence. But the artists of Europe, when viewing these objects in the ethnographic museums, knew nothing of their specific religious meanings and were free to see them as a means to esthetic enjoyment. What they saw was the work of men who were true to their materials, true to themselves and their culture, unusually creative, and completely unself-conscious. Matisse, Rouault, Nolde, and Kirchner recognized the importance of this integrity when the publicly-accepted art in Europe was academic, traditional, literary, sterile and shallow—anything but sincere. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant reasons why it became such an important influence so rapidly. We may well wonder, at this point, why primitive art always reveals this strong sense of integrity. It is because primitive man does not divide the important activities of his life. His religious beliefs truly form a core around which and to which all other activities are related. He does not separate the religious from the esthetic and the practical. Hence, everything he does expresses this integration.

As sincerity of expression, simplicity of form, and arbitrary color in primitive art influenced the Expressionists, the tendency toward abstract forms in primitive sculpture influenced the Cubists and Abstractionists. Cezanne stated in one of his letters: "Everything in nature may be resolved into the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder." When Picasso and Braque first became acquainted with primitive sculpture around 1905, they also saw it, not as idols representing gods and goddesses, but as works of art which they experienced esthetically. Since the days of Captain Cook, most artists—being trained in the "imitation-of-nature" manner of painting—had seen these sculptural figures as feeble and careless attempts to copy the human figure. Picasso saw them as variations based on the figure and offering new experiences to the observer. He saw the primitive artist as one who analyzed and separated the various parts of the body and then re-assembled them into a new esthetic syn-

thesis. It seems that the primitive artist—along with Plato—had already realized that there is no advantage to presenting an imitation of nature, but that a work of art should give us a new experience. In 1907, Picasso completed what is known historically as the first cubist painting, entitled: "Damoiselles d'Avignon". In it he used the influence of both African Negro sculpture and some primitive sculptures of uncertain origin which had been unearthed in Spain and which he had seen the previous summer. Cubism was the first complete revolution in the history of painting since the beginning of the Renaissance.

Like Expressionism, Cubism has a gradual history behind it. During the last seventy-five years, our civilization has gone further in questioning its own foundations than any previous civilization. Clement Greenwood says it all began with the philosopher Kant who criticized ". . . the very means of criticism." The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had denied the arts most of those tasks they could take seriously. In order to avoid becoming pure entertainment, the arts were forced to prove that they could provide a kind of experience that was valuable in itself and could not be obtained from any other activity. At the end of the nineteenth century, academic painters were still using oil paint in a way that concealed art in order to create a more convincing illusion of the natural world. All of the paintings exhibited in the Columbian Exposition in 1892 were of this type. Their subjects were literary and often, with the title, told a story. But as painters learned to be true to their medium, they left the stories to the writer and dramatist and placed more emphasis on painting as painting. During the 1880's, Manet left drawn lines in his paintings and shocked the critics who complained because drawn lines did not appear in nature. Monet and the other Impressionists did not smooth out their brush-strokes but left them ridged on the canvas. Gauguin and his synthetist friends defined painting as ". . . a flat plane upon which shapes and colors are arranged in a certain order." This recognition of the importance of paint quality and the awareness of the flat plane are necessary if the painter is to be true to his medium.

In the development of Cubism, Picasso and Braque took many ideas from the abstract characteristics found in African sculpture. From 1906 through 1912, they were gradually flattening out the picture plane until there was hardly any depth at all. At the same time their subjects became more abstract and less recognizable. During 1910, Mondrian in Holland and Kandinsky in Germany created non-objective paintings—paintings with no representation whatever. By 1917, Mondrian had completely eliminated illusionistic movement in space.

This need for truth to the medium was not peculiar to painting. Sculptors began to take advantage of the natural qualities in wood and stone and to produce bronzes that had obviously been modelled in clay or wax. Frank Lloyd Wright insisted that the form of buildings should be determined by their location, their function, and by the materials used in their construction. Poets concentrated more on complex rhythms, word-sounds, images, and moods in a search for what poetry could do best. Story-telling was left to the prose writers.

This truth to material is the second important contribution the knowl-

edge of primitive work has made to the art of this century. Exhibited at the London Exposition of 1851, was a Maori village brought all the way from New Zealand. After studying the buildings, a German architect named Semper published a book on applied art in which he wrote that: "True decoration originates from material, technique, and purpose." This is one of the earliest statements concerning truth to materials and it grew out of experience with primitive art. The primitive sculptor first analyzed the figure—taking it apart: a head, neck, torso, two arms, two legs. Then he reassembled these parts, not according to nature, but according to an esthetic demand based on his material, the function of the object and its symbolic significance. By its very nature, primitive art aroused interest among artists who were already struggling with the problem of truth to materials.

Since we do not know the symbolic significance of primitive works, we see them as examples of abstract art. Because of this, they could hardly have influenced European art until the artists had moved in the direction of the abstract. Before 1890, both Seurat and Cezanne had shown more interest in the shapes and colors and the relations between them in their paintings than they had in their subjects. When Cézanne depicted a tree, its color, shape, and position were determined by the other colors, shapes and their location in his composition. All parts work as a total integration—each is interdependent on all others. When experiencing a painting by Van Gogh, we are often aware of the rhythms and paint quality before we identify its subject. By 1905, Matisse, Nolde, Braque, and Picasso had seen enough of the works of Cézanne, Seurat, and Van Gogh to appreciate the abstract qualities in primitive art. This had to happen before it could become an influence.

During this century, we have witnessed a great proliferation of styles in painting and sculpture. This has happened because the serious artist has been searching for his own individual identity and an integrated means of expression that is true both to that identity and to his chosen medium. However, the entire process reveals much deeper cultural meanings. The artist is an artist because he is more sensitive to conditions and demands in his culture than others. Being sensitive to these conditions and finding some of his own solutions through the influence of primitive art, he may be telling us that primitive cultures can offer help to the solution of some of our broader cultural problems. The artist learned the importance of honesty of expression and truth to materials. Because our world is rapidly growing smaller and more thickly populated, never before have men and nations so badly needed faith in each other—faith built on trust and trust built on truth. Never before have so many people lived out their lives without finding their true identity or realizing their full potential. We must learn to integrate our lives rather than fragment them, to speak in truths rather than rationalizations, and to destroy the illusions that blind us to reality. We must learn to express ourselves honestly in relation to what we are and to what we can become. This is the meaning that serious artists have found in primitive art. It is also a message that the art of our times has for us if we are open-minded enough to see it.