The “Primitivism” conundrum

by Hilton Kramer

On “Primitivism in 20th-Century Art” at MOMA.

The exhibition which the Museum of Modern Art has mounted this fall under the title, “Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” is an event of unusual interest. Even before one has entered the exhibition itself, one is struck by something odd and interesting in its title. I refer to those highly suggestive quotation marks which hold the word “Primitivism” so visibly in their grip, appearing to separate it from its customary associations while at the same time nudging it (or so it seems) in the direction of irony and doubt, and thereby alerting us to a possible shift in historical perspective. As a result of those insistent quotation marks, one is more or less obliged to enter this exhibition with a large question on one’s mind—a question not only about the phenomenon of primitivism itself and what it meant before it sprouted this newly acquired grammatical encumbrance, but about the exact relation that is now thought to obtain between this new and, as it were, problematical “Primitivism” and the older, more familiar, un-bequoted primitivism of yore.

Yet, though the question is posed in the title of the exhibition, it remains resolutely unanswered, if not indeed unanswerable, in the exhibition itself. To understand the decision, obviously a carefully considered one, to enclose the world “Primitivism” in those unexpected quotation marks, one must therefore turn to the weighty, two-volume publication that does not so much accompany the exhibition as supply it with its all-encompassing raison d’être. In fact, one must study this two-volume work, with its nineteen essays written by a formidable team of scholars, in order to understand the exhibition itself and not just those pesky quotation marks. (The latter, by the way, pretty much disappear in the body of the book—a subject to which I shall return.) And this alerts us to another odd and interesting thing about this exhibition. It appears to have been conceived as a contribution to thought, and not as just another exhibition tracing the course of a familiar artistic development. What it attempts is nothing less than a full-scale study of the multiform role—aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual—played by the art of primitive peoples in the artistic achievements of the modern era. Thus, whatever the exhibition may offer us in the way of visual delectation—and parts of it certainly offer a great deal in this respect—its principal goal lies
elsewhere. For this is an exhibition designed, above all, to illuminate the place occupied by certain ideas in shaping a large area of the cultural terrain in which our artistic aspirations and accomplishments have had their genesis.

This, it seems to me, is a commendable ambition. Modernist art is, by and large, an art of ideas. It remains an art of ideas even (or especially) when it turns against the inherited modalities of Western thought in favor of those that are understood to be of a more primitive origin, and the trouble with a great many exhibitions devoted to modernist art is not that they tell us too much about these ideas but that they tell us too little. As a result, the objects on view tend to be denuded of the intellectual impulses that are very often central to their conception. On the other hand, the kind of ambition which this particular exhibition has set for itself is extremely difficult to implement. The museum exhibition format does not easily lend itself to the exposition or exploration of ideas. The temptation to simplify complex issues is all but irresistible, for there is a limit as to how much thought the visitor to an exhibition can be expected to absorb in his encounters with the objects on display. In the end, ideas must be “packaged” for quick consumption, and this inevitably leads to a superficiality, if not an outright distortion, that is likely to subvert the seriousness of the entire enterprise. Given the conditions of contemporary museology—most especially, the need to attract large box-office revenues in order to amortize and/or justify the large expense involved in producing such exhibitions—the problem would appear to be an insoluble one.

The solution that has been attempted in the case of the “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” exhibition is not, I think, a success. The contribution to thought which the exhibition was clearly intended to embody is largely confined to those two hefty volumes which the museum has published in lieu of a catalogue. And it is not a question, in this installation, of allowing the objects to speak for themselves. Almost nowhere in this exhibition are they permitted to do so. Much of the show is presented to us in a rigidly didactic format. The atmosphere of instruction is often heavy and unremitting, with a great many objects juxtaposed and illuminated in display cases very much as if they were pairs of slides projected on a screen in a classroom. Even the lights in the galleries have been dimmed to underscore the slide-lecture atmosphere, yet the “lesson” to be derived from the spectacle proves to be elusive. Those two big volumes run to hundreds of pages of text, augmented by hundreds of notes (some of them miniature essays in themselves) and hundreds of glossy illustrations (many of them devoted to objects not included in the exhibition); yet only a kind of caricature of this impressive compendium of history, analysis, and reflection survives in the lengthy explanatory labels which importune the visitor to the exhibition at every turn, telling him exactly what to make of what he is looking at. Despite the fact that we are almost everywhere treated as beginning students for whom the visual attributes of every object and the “affinities” linking one with another must be pointed out and their every “meaning” explicated and summarized, we are allowed to leave this dazzling survey with only the dimmest notion of what its true significance may be.
The truth is, this exhibition is often a mere shadow of the book that has occasioned its organization, and much that is important in the book—and important to the subject—is either scanted or omitted in the exhibition itself. For example, the essay on “German Expressionism,” written by the late Donald E. Gordon and included in Volume II of “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, is not only a brilliant analysis of the crucial role played by primitive art and primitivist ideology in the development of the Expressionist movement; it is probably the single best small-scale account of Expressionism as a European cultural phenomenon any writer has yet given us. It also has the virtue of illuminating a good deal more than the subject of German Expressionism. Professor Gordon had pondered this subject for many years, and he had a deeper grasp of it than any other American art historian. What he had come to understand was “that primitivism affected Expressionism in two ways: both as life idea and as art idea,” and he set himself the task of illuminating this double allegiance, which stands in such marked contrast to the more purely aesthetic manner in which the discovery of tribal art affected the artists of the School of Paris.

In Germany [writes Professor Gordon in this essay] . . . Expressionists discovered in themselves a kinship with agrarian peoples. It was easy to idealize such peoples around 1910–11, during Germany’s rapid urbanization, or again around 1919–20 after a dehumanizing, mechanized war. In city studios artists re-created the imagined environment of tribal life. And in the countryside the life style of peasants was appreciated for its own sake. Some artists even “went native” during summer vacations, living in the nude with their models and practicing a sexual camaraderie that paraphrased—so they thought—the supposed instinctual freedom of tribal life.

As with life style, so with art style: German artists emulated Primitive example. The prototypes ranged from the flat and silhouettelike painted reliefs of Palau to the powerful, three-dimensional forms of Cameroon sculpture. There is a hardy “look” to much Expressionist art—angular in shape, geometric in detail, stubby in proportion—that is unthinkable without the Primitive precedent. Vitalism was also important: Eyes, mouths, breasts, genitalia were all given expressive prominence. Even in repose the Expressionist face and figure seem packed with energy. These are all German derivations from tribal art.

Yet, despite their profound debt to primitive art and a primitivist ideology, the Expressionists remained firmly attached to one of the most deeply entrenched traditions of Western thought—the romantic tradition that invoked the purity and vitality of nature as an alternative to the moribund forms of inherited culture. It was part of the paradox of their situation that it was, however, by way of culture—specifically, the writings of Nietzsche and Walt Whitman—that they came to their appreciation of the primitivist ideal. “Thus the Expressionist [writes Professor Gordon] was engaged in a very particular kind of enterprise. He was conducting a dialogue between Urnatur and modern art, a dialectic between primordial nature and advanced culture . . . . What Expressionists added to this romantic tradition, however, was an understanding of consciousness as the link between nature and art. For them the issue was how the mind translated instinct—the mainspring of nature—into art as the high achievement of culture. Expressionists faced the issue as Nietzsche had, by demonstrating a tie between the primitive and the modern mind, between the ‘savage’ storyteller and the modern artist-dreamer.”
This, it seems to me, goes to the heart of the matter that is ostensibly explored in the “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” exhibition, and there is no way for the subject to be fully grasped without according to the Expressionist movement a major role in the exhibition itself. It was the German Expressionists, after all, who adopted certain views (most especially the view of primitivism “both as life idea and as art idea”) first broached in the life and work of Gauguin, with whom this exhibition begins chronologically, and made them central to their entire artistic and spiritual mission. And it is in the ethos, if not the aesthetic, of the Expressionist movement that we find the most vivid foreshadowing of that concern for primitivism “as life idea” which looms so large in the “Contemporary Explorations” section of this exhibition, the section dealing with art since 1970. Between the ideas of the Expressionists and those of the artists represented in the “Contemporary Explorations” section there are indeed many important resemblances, for in its ideological outlook—though seldom in the art which resulted from it—the Expressionist movement anticipated a great many of the beliefs that dominated the radical counterculture of the late Sixties and thereby came to play a transfiguring role in the neo-primitivist art of the Seventies. There is thus, in spiritual terms, a direct line of descent that can be traced from Gauguin to Expressionism to the neo-primitivist outlook of the Seventies. It differs greatly from the more purely aesthetic line that leads from Gauguin to the Fauves and to Picasso. It constitutes, in fact, one of the major 
revolté traditions of cultural life in this century, and one naturally expected it to receive appropriate attention in an exhibition called “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art.”

Yet what do we find in the exhibition itself? Not for the first time at the Museum of Modern Art, the whole Expressionist movement is relegated to a more or less marginal position—almost, indeed, a position of inconsequence. In the so-called “History” section of the show, we are offered a miserly selection of objects shunted into a mean, corridorlike space that has the effect of belittling, if not actually obliterating, the entire subject. There is simply no way for the uninformed visitor to the exhibition to acquire, from either the works on view or the labels serving as a guide to them, any real sense of the Expressionists’ contribution to the history being recounted here. And the Expressionists suffer an even worse fate in the introductory section of the exhibition, called “Concepts,” from which they have been totally excluded. In this section of the exhibition, space has somehow been found for the work of Max Weber, an American painter whose oeuvre had only a passing relation to the subject, whereas a major Expressionist like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, whose work is central to it, has been omitted. And in the little throwaway booklet which the Museum provides for those visitors—the majority, of course—who cannot be expected to read those two big volumes, there is likewise no trace of the Expressionists’ contribution. There is instead a silly little warning about a possible “misreading” of an Ibibio mask in relation to an Edvard Munch print. Exactly what Munch’s The Shriek is doing in this exhibition remains something of a mystery, in any case, for it is only in the generation following Munch’s that the Expressionists begin to interest themselves in primitive art.

One can only conclude that the prejudice against Expressionism is now so deep-seated at the
Museum that the actualities of art history are no longer allowed to make themselves feit. This being the case, I suppose we should be grateful for the merciful exception that was made in the case of Professor Gordon’s essay. What this means, however, is that the art historians and other specialists who read through Volume II of “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art will know the truth and the larger public seeing the exhibition will not—a curious state of affairs, to say the least. The whole issue remains a disturbing and perplexing one, and the exhibition has been seriously damaged by the way it has been handled.

One could scarcely make a complaint of this sort about the treatment accorded to Picasso in this exhibition. The attention lavished on Picasso is so comprehensive, in fact, that much of this show consists of a protracted hommage to the master, making it in some respects yet another pendant to the mammoth retrospective which MOMA devoted to the artist in 1980. There is ample reason for this, of course. In his essay on Picasso for Volume I of “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art—an essay, incidentally, that runs to over one hundred pages and constitutes a major monograph in itself—William Rubin writes that “In no other artist’s career has primitivism played so pivotal and historically consequential a role as in Picasso’s.” In accordance with this view, Picasso emerges as the dominant figure in the exhibition, and the principal revelations of the exhibition are, in fact, revelations about Picasso and the use he made of primitive art at crucial moments in his own artistic development.

The case that Mr. Rubin is concerned to make on this score is greatly strengthened by the abundance of material he has been able to marshal for this exhibition. A great many tribal objects from Picasso’s own collection have been brought to the museum, and others that the artist would have seen on the occasion of his historic visit to the Trocadero in Paris in 1907—the year that he completed the final version of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon—have also been brought over. Many drawings from this period have also been gathered for the exhibition, including a good many not previously exhibited. We are thus in a position to see exactly what it was in these tribal objects that made so fateful an impression on Picasso’s sensibility at a critical juncture in his development. The conjunction of these tribal objects and the drawings related to them, all seen now in the presence of Les Demoiselles, leave one in little doubt about the depth of Picasso’s response to what was then a new and profoundly shocking artistic experience.

It is Mr. Rubin’s belief that this encounter with tribal art had the effect of altering not only the forms and even the color Picasso then employed in the completion of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon but something much more fundamental in his artistic outlook—his sense of what the very function of art might be for him. Picasso later spoke of Les Demoiselles as his “first exorcism picture.” To André Malraux, he referred to the tribal art he saw at the Trocadero as “magical objects . . . intercessors . . . against everything—against unknown, threatening spirits . . . They were weapons—to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help free themselves.” For Mr. Rubin, then, the really crucial change that occurred as a result of Picasso’s initial encounter with these tribal objects is to be found in the artist’s effort to appropriate for his own purposes something akin to the “magical”
powers he felt he had glimpsed in the art of these primitive cultures.

To support this view, Mr. Rubin is more or less obliged to speculate about exactly what it was that Picasso was so determined, at that crucial juncture in his life, to be free of. The answer that he proffers to this question—that Picasso was deeply involved in a private ritual designed to free himself of his fear of women and his fear of death—is not altogether unpersuasive. We have long known that Picasso's art was profoundly autobiographic from the outset, and there is no reason why *Les Demoiselles* should be exempted from occupying an important place in the long “diary” of private emotions that his oeuvre is now often taken to be. Yet I wonder if I am alone in believing that this facile Freudianizing of Picasso’s art—earlier on, Mr. Rubin speaks of Picasso’s “precocious oedipal triumph” over his father in the Nineties—has the effect of trivializing the work in question? It certainly has the effect of overlooking, or at least diminishing, what it was that Picasso had in common with so many other modern artists when he looked to primitive art for inspiration. Surely we are not being asked to believe that the entire primitivist phenomenon in twentieth-century art derives from a fear of women? There are, to be sure, certain feminist art historians who have been attempting to promulgate precisely this view, but I doubt if Mr. Rubin counts himself among them. In any event, if it was Picasso’s aim in painting the completed version of *Les Demoiselles* to overcome his fear of women and his fear of death, he must finally be judged to have failed in that endeavor. Sexual rage remained one of the enduring leitmotifs of his art during a very long career, and death too continued to occupy a significant place among his themes. The “magical” properties Picasso so much admired in the art of primitive peoples were not, after all, something that an avant-garde artist working in Paris in the twentieth century could hope to appropriate. Their magic was not to be his. The real question is: what did *his* consist of?

We shall be a good deal closer to an answer to this question, I believe, if we abandon the attempt to provide *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* with a Freudian interpretation and shift the discussion back to where it belongs—to the life of forms in art and to the role played by radical changes in form in giving expression to an altered consciousness of civilization itself. Can anyone still doubt that the whole primitivist phenomenon in twentieth-century art was, at least in one of its important aspects, an outright attack on the conventions and assumptions of Western cultural life as they had come to be seen in the established values of advanced industrial societies? In this respect, certainly, Picasso—at least in the period of *Les Demoiselles*—was indeed attempting to effect a revolution in cultural consciousness.

That the culture he set out to attack and transform proved to be more resilient in its response to this assault than anyone at the time had reason to expect; that it showed itself capable of absorbing such assaults and profiting from the lessons to be learned from them—this, I should have thought, would now, in the next to last decade of the twentieth century, have become an acknowledged datum of critical intelligence. In his opening essay for “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, called “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” Mr. Rubin observes that “The Cubist artist’s notion that there was something important to be learned from the sculpture of tribal peoples—an art
whose appearance and assumptions were diametrically opposed to prevailing aesthetic canons—could only be taken by bourgeois culture as an attack upon its values.” Yet it remains unclear whether or not Mr. Rubin believes this was an attack on bourgeois culture. I believe it was. I also believe it was an attack that profoundly altered the values of bourgeois culture, making it more receptive to alien modes of consciousness than it would otherwise have been. In the legendary conflicts between the avant-garde and bourgeois culture, we have tended to assume that it was the avant-garde alone which provided the dynamic element and that bourgeois culture remained fixed and adamantly resistant to change. But this was not the case, and it is bad history to think so.

What I find sadly and conspicuously lacking in the hundreds of pages of text offered up to us in “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art— which, for very good reasons, is bound to remain the classic scholarly work on this subject for many years to come—is any serious account of the way bourgeois culture responded to this primitivist assault on its values. That is a story yet to be told. It was to be expected that it would be omitted from the exhibition, but it is a special disappointment that it has also been omitted from a publication so evidently designed to provide a comprehensive account of its subject. By and large, the contributors to “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art tend to steer clear of the social and political implications of their material. The outstanding exception, however, is Kirk Varnedoe’s essay on the “Contemporary Explorations” section of the exhibition. There at last, in the concluding pages of Volume II, we are finally brought face to face with what Professor Varnedoe characterizes as the “dark side” of the primitivist phenomenon:

But there is a dark side to this issue as well [he writes], and it has to do with more than just bad art or even overtly pessimistic art. It has to do with primitivism per se, and it involves politics. All the questions [about] . . . collectivity versus individual experience, of controlling order versus instinctual liberty, translate eventually into larger political implications. Inasmuch as it has been by definition a critique of modern Western society, all primitivism has always had such implications, and they reverberate through good and sensitive art as certainly as through the broad range of neo-tribal agitprop that the last two decades have witnessed. The latter work, in which political concerns have been aggressively self-conscious and specific, most quickly forces to the fore uncomfortable questions about the ultimate content of all ideals that propose escape from the Western tradition into a Primitive state.

This entire “Primitivism” project—both the exhibition and the book—would have been a very different event, and a far more interesting one, too, I think, if it had addressed itself to this issue from the outset and not left it to the end. But one is grateful, all the same, for Professor Varnedoe’s eloquent analysis of it.

As it happens, there is to be found in one aspect of this event a telltale sign of what the current response of bourgeois culture is to the primitivism phenomenon—I refer, of course, to those curious quotation marks which enclose the word “Primitivism” in the title of the exhibition and to which I alluded at the start of this essay. These quotation marks, it turns out, have nothing to contribute to our understanding of the subject under study. Contrary to the expectation they
arouse when we first encounter them, they neither cast doubt on the concept of primitivism nor attempt to give it an ironic interpretation. As I mentioned earlier, they pretty much disappear from the body of the book once their use has been explained. Their purpose, to be blunt about it, is political. They have been introduced into the title of this exhibition in the hope of forestalling criticism from those in the Third World and elsewhere who look upon the term “primitive” as a pejorative characterization of their cultural heritage. Mr. Rubin devotes a great many words to explaining why the term is necessary, and why it—and the term “tribal”—should not be regarded as in any way invidious. He does not want it to be thought that he is one of those terrible people who regard Western civilization as somehow “superior” to the cultures of primitive peoples. Yet when all of his ingeniosities on behalf of this dubious proposition have been concluded, he allows the word primitivism to slip right back into its standard usage. He is right to do so. But in this public display of nervousness and defensiveness, now made permanent in the title of this exhibition and its book, he has told us something important—and not something good —about the relation in which our culture now stands to the primitivist ideal.

1. “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” directed by William Rubin in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, opened at the Museum of Modern Art on September 27 and remains on view through January 15. It will then travel to the Detroit Institute of Arts (February 27–May 19) and the Dallas Museum of Art (June 23–September 1). The exhibition includes approximately one hundred and fifty modern European and American works and more than two hundred tribal objects from Africa, Oceania, and North America.


3. For a discussion of the way Expressionism has been slighted in the new installation of the Museum’s permanent collection of painting and sculpture, see my essay, “MOMA Reopened” (The New Criterion, Special Issue: Summer 1984, page 29).

Hilton Kramer (1928-2012) was the founding editor of The New Criterion, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.