

"PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART

Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern

52
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 WEST 53 STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10019
(212) 708-9400

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

No. 17

August, 1984

NEW EXHIBITION OPENING SEPTEMBER 27 AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXAMINES "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART

Few if any external influences on the work of modern painters and sculptors have been more critical than that of the tribal arts of Africa, Oceania and North America. Since the turn of the century when Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, and others first acquainted themselves with masks and sculptures from these areas, modern artists have continued to display strong interest in the art and culture of tribal societies. The term "primitivism" is used to describe the Western response to tribal cultures as revealed in the work and thought of modern artists.

Recognizing the importance of this issue in modern art history--and the relative lack of serious research devoted to it--The Museum of Modern Art in New York this fall presents a groundbreaking exhibition that underscores the parallelisms that exist between the two arts. Entitled "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, the exhibition, which opens on September 27 and runs through January 15, 1985, is the first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history. William Rubin, head of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture and director of the landmark 1980 Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective, has organized the show in collaboration with Professor Kirk Varnedoe of New York University's

more/

Institute of Fine Arts.

"PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern
and its 1985 national tour to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Dallas
Museum of Art are sponsored by Philip Morris Incorporated. Additional support
has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The exhibition includes approximately 150 modern works, covering the
period from the turn of the century to the present. Special emphasis has
been placed on those artists and movements--Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi,
Modigliani, Klee, the Expressionists and Surrealists--most deeply involved
with tribal art, and several rarely seen works by these artists will be exhibited
to elucidate this interest.

More than 200 tribal objects from Africa, Oceania and North America will be
presented. Among the works are a number of the world's outstanding examples
of tribal art, including a monumental wood figure from Nukuoro (Caroline Islands).
This rare and highly prized object has never before been lent by the Auckland
Institute and Museum of New Zealand. Also included is a striking, 23-foot-high
barkcloth and cane frame figure from the Baining people of New Britain, on loan
from the Ethnological Museum of Hamburg. In addition, masks and sculptures
from the personal collections of Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Derain, Nolde, Ernst,
Matta, and other modern painters and sculptors will be on display.

The beginnings of "primitivism" can be traced to Paul Gauguin. It was
he who just before the turn of the century began melding the perceptual realism
of Impressionism with flat decorative effects and stylized forms found in many
non-Western arts, including sculptures from Cambodia, Java and Polynesia.
This shift away from the purely perceptual to a more conceptual style gathered
momentum in the first decades of the 20th century, fueled at least in part

more/

by the ever-increasing availability of African and Oceanic tribal objects in centers of artistic activity such as Paris, and by pioneer modernists' "discovery" of the beauty and complexity of objects previously considered mere curiosities. Tribal works soon began showing up in the studios of Picasso, Matisse, Vlaminck, Derain, and others, and it was not long before tribal forms--often much metamorphosed and extrapolated--could be seen in their work. Many of the key works associated with seminal modernists--Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger and his Cubist metal Guitar, Brancusi's Madame L.R., Klee's Mask of Fear, Nolde's Masks, Ernst's Bird-Head, to name but a few--reflect the direct influence of tribal art forms.

"PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern is divided into four sections plus annexes:

(1) Concepts establishes fundamental aspects of the modern response to tribal objects. Selected comparisons between modern and tribal objects probe the basic issues raised by the intersection of the two arts.

(2) History reviews the direct influence of tribal arts on modern painters and sculptors, from Gauguin at the turn of the century to the Abstract Expressionists around 1950. Frequently, modern works are juxtaposed with specific tribal objects that the artists owned or knew from local museums. This section also illustrates those types of tribal objects that became available and influential in successive decades of modern art's development. (The annex to History deals with tribal influences on art work done for modern theatrical productions.)

(3) Affinities presents a group of superb tribal objects notable for their appeal to modern interests. Also, selected pairings of modern and tribal

objects demonstrate basic common denominators of these arts that are independent of direct influences.

(4) Contemporary Explorations presents a selection of post-1970 Western art that draws its inspiration not so much from tribal objects as from a more conceptualized sympathy with the methods, materials and mentality of Primitive cultures. Structures of myth and cosmology here combine with a primal sense of art-making activity to embody a strongly altered but still vital bond between modern and tribal creation. (This section also includes video and performance work.)

A major, two-volume 690-page text, "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART, edited by William Rubin, has been published by The Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with the exhibition. Containing 1,087 illustrations, including 378 in color, the book is the first comprehensive scholarly treatment of its subject in half a century and the first book ever to illustrate and discuss tribal works collected by vanguard artists.

An introductory essay by Mr. Rubin defines the parameters of modernist "primitivism" and sketches the history of Western attitudes towards tribal peoples and their art. Succeeding background chapters by historians of Primitive art trace the arrival and dissemination of African, Oceanic, American Indian, and Eskimo art in the West. Fifteen other essays by a variety of scholars discuss the major artistic figures and movements in terms of the complex aesthetic, art historical and sociological problems posed by this dramatic development in the history of modern art. The publication has been made possible by grants from Philip Morris Incorporated and The Eugene McDermott Foundation.

For further information, contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, or Pamela Sweeney, Assistant to the Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York, 10019....(212) 708-9750.
