"PRIMITIVISM" IN AMERICAN ART: SOME LITERARY PARALLELS OF THE 1910s AND 1920s

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American writers of the first and second decade of the century sought special American roots in a "primitivism" akin to the fascination with the same theme in art.

Primitivism in American art began under the aegis of the European avant-garde, but it soon merged with certain American aspirations and assumed a distinctive character. While some American artists were interested in African tribal art for its diverse formal and evocative qualities, others looked to the themes and motifs of American Indian art which offered American modernists an answer to nationalistic critics' demands not only for an American style but also for a native American subject matter.

American interest in primitivism was not limited to the visual arts. The artist and critic Walter Pach noted in 1920: "Poets, artists, and those scientists who see that their profession must take heed of aesthetic ideas are naturally the first to become aware of the profound value of the Primitive...."

It is not the intention of this study to focus on the work of those primarily known as visual artists, for I have discussed these figures, including Max Weber, Marsden Hartley, Man Ray, William Zorach, Alexander Calder, and others, in my essay in the catalogue for "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, the exhibition currently at the Museum of Modern Art. Rather, this essay investigates the little-known vogue of primitivism among American writers, particularly poets. Before discussing the interest in "primitivism" among the American literary avant-garde and their connections to visual artists with whom they shared this enthusiasm, it is important to review some of their common sources for knowledge about tribal art and culture.

One of the first times African sculpture was exhibited in America as art rather than as ethnological artifact was in the exhibition held at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, "291," in November 1914, arranged by Stieglitz with the help of Marius de Zayas. This exhibition had, in fact, been anticipated by Robert Coady when he showed some examples of American art at his Washington Square Gallery in the spring of 1914.

Coady, who also exhibited European modern art, the work of American Negro children, and South Sea sculptural, crusaded for the recognition of the black contribution to American culture. In 1916-17, Coady published a magazine called The Soul which served as a platform for his eccentric opinions regarding modern art in America. In The Soul, he juxtaposed reproductions of primitive sculpture and photographs of industrial machinery and contemporary urban vistas, accompanying these incongruous pairings with quintessentially Dada statements.

About the same time, in October 1915, Marius de Zayas, along with Paul Haviland, Francis Picabia, and Agnes Meyer, opened the Modern Gallery, as an extension of Stieglitz's efforts. They showed modern art and photography along with examples of primitive art, explaining their desire "to illustrate the relationship between these things and the art of today." In Camera Work of October 1916, de Zayas published an essay called "Modern Art in Connection with Negro Art," and in that same year, the book, African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art. Here he argued that African art "has reawakened in us the feeling for abstract form; it has brought into our art the means to express our purely sensorial feelings in regard to form, or to find new form in our ideas." De Zayas also wrote the introduction to Charles Sheeler's folio book of photographs, African Negro Wood Sculpture, published in 1918, which illustrated works from the Modern Gallery where important patrons of modern art including John Quinn, Agnes Meyer, and Walter Arensberg had purchased primitive sculptures.

In the early twentieth century, American Indian art could be seen in New York at the Museum of Natural History and at the Brooklyn Museum; the Museum of the American Indian opened in 1916. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago offered Midwesterners a varied exhibition of Indian art. These exhibitions, however, were all ethnological in their orientation. It was not until 1931 that the
artist John Sloan helped organize the great Exhibition of Indian Tribal Arts, held at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York in 1931-32, which first treated the objects as art rather than as ethnological artifacts.

During the 1920s, interest in primitive art in America was fostered by several important publications. In 1926, *Primitivist Sculpture* by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro was published with illustrations of works in the collection of the Barnes Foundation. Guillaume, the Paris dealer who had provided Marin de Zayas with works for the African sculpture exhibition at "291" in 1914, and Munro, a professor of modern art at the University of Pennsylvania, not only dealt with African art in the context of tribal life, but considered African art's "relation to contemporary art" and claimed it offered a "compromise between representation and design." Anthropologist Franz Boas' influential *Primitivist Art*, first published in America in 1928, countered the prevailing attitude that primitive people's mental capacity was lower than that of Western man. Boas, who endowed an explanation of primitive styles, focused on the art of Northwest Coast Indians, and his book generated much interest in their art.

In the first half of the twentieth century, both in Europe and in America, there was a growing interest in African culture in general; among the avant-garde, this was frequently extended to a fascination with black Americans, especially their development of jazz music. Jazz was popular with American artists and writers and, as many famous African jazz musicians toured Europe, particularly during the 1920s, they influenced writers, artists, and fellow musicians. Artists were attracted to the improvisational aspects of jazz as well as to its directness and simplicity, qualities they also appreciated in African sculpture and associated with black culture in general.

The white avant-garde saw blacks as symbolic of their own search for personal freedom, able to evade convention and expectation. These whites saw Harlem as a place that had "magically survived the psychosis of Puritanism." One view suggests that blacks in Harlem were actually induced in defining their own identities by the vanguard whites who were mesmerized by their own view of black life. Nonetheless, black American artists were encouraged to consider African art by black writer Alain Locke who argued: "African art, therefore, presents to the Negro artist in the New World a challenge to recapture his heritage of creativity, and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new and racially expressive art." Numerous early twentieth-century white writers depicted blacks as having escaped the dehumanizing technological turmoil of industrial society and celebrated what they viewed as their childlike, innocent nature in direct contrast to their own tainted civilization with its sophisticated, stressful dynamics. By early 1914, Vachel Lindsay, a former student of Robert Henri, was repeating his poem "The Congo" (which he subtitled "A Study of the Negro Race") before William Butler Yeats at a Poetry magazine banquet:

*Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM*,

THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision,

I could not turn from their revel in derision.

THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK,

CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.

His chief supporter, Poetry editor Harriet Monroe, saw his poems as a return to "a closer relation between the poet and his audience" as in "primitive nations," and compared his work to "the wonderful song-dances of the Hops and others of our aboriginal tribes." In his focus on contemporary stereotypes about African tribal culture and his interest in primitive sounds, Lindsay responded to the influence of jazz and to current discussion of anthropological investigations of primitive cultures, but his own sources were diverse. He wrote to Harriet Monroe that his poem "The Congo," a "rag-time epic that takes about seven minutes," had been inspired in part by "the Dahomey dancers at the World's Fair," referring to his recollection of visiting the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, as an impressionable teenager. He had probably been drawn to African culture because both his parents were enthusiastic Christian evangelists who supported missionary work in Africa. By 1893, the Lind-
It is significant that Gertrude Stein, then living in Paris, finished writing her portrait of the young American black woman, Melanthera (one of the short stories in Three Lives), during the period she was posing for Picasso's portrait of her in 1909-1910. While Stein modeled Melanthera on the Negro women she had met during her outpatient work in obstetrics where she had been a medical student at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, her creation of Melanthera also coincides with her initial acquaintance with Matisse and his growing interest in African sculpture. Stein's language in "Melanthera," based on the characters' interior and spoken monologues, which has been described as "drummed out by the insistent rhythms of speech, the simple, blunt, declarative sentences of the style," can be thought of as a kind of literary primitivism.

The simplistic view of blacks as an antidote to the machine age re-emerged in the 1920s in American novels like Waldo Frank's Holiday and in Carl Van Vechten's unfortunately titled Nigger Heaven. An enthusiast of black culture, Van Vechten, who contrasted white society to the Negro's "natural sense of elemental rhythm and passion," hoped to have Picasso illustrate Nigger Heaven and even enlisted Gertrude Stein to persuade the artist, revealing his appreciation of the parallel of his theme to Picasso's primitivism. In his notes for the novel, Van Vechten explained his choice of title which was misinterpreted by many critics: "Nigger Heaven is an American slang expression for the topmost gallery of a theatre, so-called because in certain of the United States, Negroes who visit the playhouse are arbitrarily forced to sit in these cheap seats. The title of this novel derives from the fact that the geographical position of Harlem, the Negro quarter of New York, corresponds to the location of the gallery in a theatre." Van Vechten, who was also known as a photographer, was a long-time supporter of the American black and a friend of many prominent blacks, including poet Langston Hughes, who was also a critic and greatly admired jazz. At the salon-style party Van Vechten and his wife held, his interest in the primitive was indicated when he had Chief Long Lance perform Indian war dances. This followed an evening some years earlier that he had arranged at Mabel Dodge's salon with Negro entertainment.

In his novel Holiday, Waldo Frank, who was also a social, literary, and art critic in the coterie of Alfred Stieglitz, employed the rhythms of black and Southern dialect, assisted by his friend, the black author and poet Jean Toomer, with whom he traveled in the South in September 1922 while this book was in progress. In 1923, Toomer published a collection of his work in Cane, which included the poem "Georgia Dusk," which deals with black America's african heritage, "The solid proof of former domicile." Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,

Race memories of king and caravans.

High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,

Go singing through the footsteps of the swamp.

Toomer's reverence for his African heritage, which coincides with interest in African art, continues in the poetry of other black poets during the 1930s, for example, "Afro-American Fragment" by Langston Hughes:

So Long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood -
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue -
So long.  
So far away  
Is Africa.  

The vogue for African art in America made the black continent seem closer, more immediate. The evocative power of these sculptures inspired Eugene O'Neill in his 1920 work, The Emperor Jones, an experimental mood play about primitive terror and superstition with a Negro Pullman porter, Brutus Jones, as its hero. The staging utilized the setting of a tom-tom. O'Neill recalled “reading of the religious festivals in the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there”; he also visited his artist friends, William and Margaret Zorach in Provincetown “to share a rare book they had recently acquired, which contained photographs of African woodcarvings and masks.” This was undoubtedly their copy of Charles Sheeler's 1918 folio book of photographs, African Negro Wood Sculpture, which inspired William Zorach in his depiction of his son Tassim as The Young Boy in 1921.

Several of the same writers who focused on blacks also celebrated the innocence of the American Indian. Waldo Frank, contrasting the
was seen by modernist visual artists and writers as a valid path to a more honest and less decadent means of expression—the "universal idea" about which Hartley had written to begin with in 1915. Wassily Kandinsky, in his treatise published in America in 1906 as The Art of Spiritual Harmony, had written of the modern artist's sympathy with "the Primitive" because of the mutual desire "to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external form.²³ Marius de Zayas saw that rather than naturalistic representation in art, and even mechanical representation through photography, "Negro art has made us discover the possibility of giving plastic expression to the sensation produced by the outer life, and consequently also, the possibility of finding new forces in the world of life."²⁴ Kandinsky also noted: "The night mare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet passed, it holds the awakening soul still in its grip."²⁵ It was in part this struggle to counteract the growing sense of alienation and sterility in modern society, so well articulated by Kandinsky, that led so many American (and European) artists and writers to concurrently investigate the "primitive." Their continuing exchange of ideas on the subject made primitivism one of the crucial intellectual tangles in art and literature of the 1910s and 1920s.


