**Primitivism and its various meanings**

What is meant by the notion of the primitive? The term itself has tremendous scope: does it apply to “aboriginal” cultures, to Europe before the Renaissance, to countries which have been colonized by the west, to anything which is “different” from western culture? Is childhood a form of the primitive? This use of the word is not necessarily or always a demeaning use: the discourse or context determines the value (e.g., the noble savage has positive qualities that the corrupt Westerner lacks might be a positive use). Does “primitive” simply mean “not urban” or not naturalistic? Is primitivism just another way of saying anti-modernism? Does it tell us something about the nature of passion and the belief which used to be current that primitive emotions were raw and untrammeled responses because they superceded our trained, or socialized, responses? Does “primitive” refer to content, imagery, or technique?

When it comes to identifying the primitive in modern art, there are two contradictory beliefs: that the avant-garde manifested a primitive tendency before the artists saw primitive art and the opposite – they saw primitive art and were influenced by it. A notion that a “primitive” tendency existed in the avant-garde before their exposure to primitive art is a notion that allows the primitive tendency to be seen as a sign of true expression, un tarnished by civilization. The alternative proposal, that artists such as Picasso saw African masks first and “borrowed” them tends to make Picasso’s use of the primitive into a mis-use or mistake and gives him less credit for his developments than the other view gives him.

There’s yet another approach, one which was taken by William Rubin when he curated a famous exhibition at MOMA in 1984 on *Primitivism and Modern Art*. He focused on the idea of “affinities” which he used to suggest that Picasso might have looked at a Grebo mask from the Ivory Coast, which he owned, when he made the extruding sound hole of the guitar construction of 1912, or he might not have. The reference he makes has less to do with Grebo culture than with the manner in which the Grebo masks systematically present receding planes with extrusions, or the tendency to represent negative space by positive. What Picasso therefore borrows is a conceptualization of form, and although it is likely he could have arrived at his “solution” without the mask, he did, in fact, refer to the mask as the source of his solution. Rubin’s point is that the visual resemblance is misleading if we are looking for an influence; on the other hand, if we are looking for conceptual affinities, then the similarity between the mask and the guitar may tell us why Picasso looked at the mask. Picasso’s point, however, may have been something else – especially when he “borrows” masks for the faces of the women in his painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, a decision which may have been predicated on his desire to forge a decisive break with naturalistic imitation.
Part of the difficulty in answering the question about the search for the primitive is that so many different “primitives” existed – if Picasso looked at African art, Gauguin looked at Egyptian, Tahitian, and Japanese. Larionov looked at children’s art and shop signs; Nolde looked at Oceanic masks and in his own statement about why he did it, he said that the reason why “we” value primitive art is because you can sense the artist’s hand and personal delight in the making of the art work, resulting in “absolute originality, and an intense and often grotesque expression of power and life in very simple form.”

Historians and artists have found more than one way to talk about the allure of the primitive and the fact that the idea of the primitive does not denote any single culture. Other sources of the primitive, which we didn’t mention in class, include the mentally ill. Some writers suggest that primitivism was something discovered by artists as the west colonized the east and Africa, but they also suggest that the primitive did not need to be discovered because it wasn’t a specific culture but some underlying primal and pure expression of feeling. We might simplify these points of view into two categories: the belief that all of humanity shares certain primal feelings but civilized society and complexity has blinded us to their expression; and the belief that the search for the primitive was an attempt to escape from western civilization in order to reject the west. There is a variation to the belief in the universal feelings which can be uncovered: that it is not necessarily the feelings which are universal but that all humans apprehend visual phenomenon in the same way and there is a simple, structural way of seeing which has been lost because we don’t see the world as primitives do. Yet the irony, at least in Gauguin’s case, is that despite his apparent solidification of the painting or his rejection of the transparency of impressionism, his way of seeing the world is not as simplified as you might first think: he imports ideas from Japanese art, from French textiles, from Daumier, from a multitude of sources which in the end are not true to any of the sources because he has made something new out of them (his personal “collage”). And this might be one of the most modern things he does: as an example of **image modernism** (modernism which relies on an increased range of sources), he has scavenged for visual sources and put them together rather crudely, as it were, but in so doing, he has created an original style.