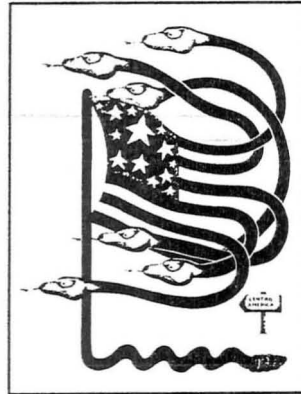


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## Primitive Art and Modern Times

Patrick Manning

America's museum-going public has become fascinated with "primitive" art. Nowhere has this esthetic preoccupation been more evident than in New York where, in the fall of 1984, four major shows of African and Oceanic art drew large crowds and widespread commentary. In one sense this greater breadth in artistic taste is a museological equivalent to the recent changes in American culinary tastes—the voracious national appetite for spicier and more varied cuisine so evident in today's restaurants and frozen-food cases. At another level, however, this new taste in art reflects a more specific effort at rapprochement between American culture and the cultures of the African and Oceanic regions on which the art shows draw. The interpretive challenge raised by this flurry of cultural activity is to explain both the wave of American interest and the values communicated by the art works on exhibit.

I propose to take up the challenge by focusing on the sculpture of Africa, and by arguing that its attractiveness in contemporary eyes stems not from new discoveries about the art itself, nor from nostalgia for the life of the noble savage who lived by simple values in an untainted world, nor even from new-found awe for the glories of ancient African civilization, but rather from the fact that this sculpture reflects the successful maintenance of nonhierarchical values in a conflict-ridden modern world. At the beginning of



this century, African sculpture proved inspirational to a small number of gifted, countercultural artists of Europe—Picasso among them, most notably—who sought alternatives to the hierarchical values of the expanding industrial order. Today a wider public turns again to African and other “primitive” art in search for an alternative to the cultural fragmentation and alienation engendered by an emerging yet already powerful post-modern cultural order.

The particular attractiveness of African sculpture in the eyes of modern primitivist artists and of contemporary American audiences can be better understood, further, by emphasizing the tensions among contending traditions of African art, and by demonstrating the transformations in African life which underlie the continent’s artistic creations. To set the scene for this analysis, let us take a figurative stroll through the exhibit halls.

The most elaborate of last year’s exhibits was the Museum of Modern Art show, “‘Primitivism’ in the 20th Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.” This show displayed key works in modern art from Paul Gauguin to Paul Klee, and set alongside them pieces of African and Oceanic sculpture, the pairings sometimes based on direct and documented influence, more often on perceived “affinity”—parallel logic in the artistic traditions of modern and “tribal” art. In a second show, the newly opened Center for African Art exhibited African sculptures from the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, including more of the very pieces viewed by Parisian artists early in this century. At the same time, the American Museum of Natural History held a major exhibit on the art of Asante (inaugurated by the Asantehene, the successor to the kings who ruled most of what is now Ghana, who himself created something of a sensation in his tour of Harlem). Finally, a show on the Maori art of New Zealand at the Metropolitan Museum began with a spectacular celebration by Maori priests.

The crowds were clearly impressed, and there has been no shortage of critical acclaim.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, many viewers—either out of sentimental ties to Africa or because of a critical view of the bourgeois world into which modern art has been drawn—responded to the juxtaposition of modern and “primitive” art by expressing preference for the latter over the former, and preference for the Center for African Art show over that at the Museum of Modern Art. According to *West Africa*, for instance, “Time and time again the imitative modern works pale beside the vitality of their tribal counterparts.”<sup>2</sup>

Of the four shows, the Museum of Modern Art exhibit was backed up by the most impressive catalog. William Rubin, the museum’s curator, edited a two-volume collection of articles on the



relationship between modern art and African and Oceanic art which stands as the most serious evaluation on the subject to date. The viewpoint centers on the evolution of modern art, with particular attention to the work of Picasso; African art is treated as material utilized, for instance, in the great artistic disjuncture represented by the Cubist movement of 1907-1915. As Rubin explains,

I want to understand the Primitive sculptures in terms of the Western context in which modern artists "discovered" them. The ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects—is irrelevant to my topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question.<sup>3</sup>

Rubin is frank in expressing his confidence that the exhibit and the accompanying study represent a major step forward in understanding modern art, as he expresses the hope that "the particular confrontation involved in our exhibition will not only help us better to understand our art, but in a very unique way, our humanity."<sup>4</sup>

The most negative response to Rubin's "confrontation" has been a castigation of the exhibit by Arthur C. Danto who, writing in *The Nation*, rejected the concept of affinities and concluded that the show yielded "a triple misunderstanding, first of primitive art, then of modern art, then of the relationships between them."<sup>5</sup> The burden of such a condemnation appears to be very heavy until one realizes that Danto is an extreme cultural relativist and that, in his eyes, no analysis of the link could be successful: "I don't think we really know the first thing about primitive art, not even whether it is right to treat it as art, however handsome and strong its objects may be."

The weakness in the Museum of Modern Art exhibit and in Rubin's analysis of it is not, as Danto suggests, in the assertion of "affinities" linking European and "tribal" art, but in the focus on only one side of the link. Straining to understand an artistic chain of transmission by tugging on one end of the chain—assuming no tension on the other end—is an exercise comparable to a Zen contemplation of the sound of one hand clapping. Understanding the link requires treating African artists, and the societies for which they created, in historical terms. It may appear, to viewers contemplating the shows, that the link between African and modern art consists entirely of the appropriation of the former by the latter. The museums do make it appear as if collectors from a dynamic and changing Euro-American tradition of artistic creation and appreciation have swept through and captured the gems of a timeless tradition of African creativity, only to display them utterly bereft of

their cultural context. Appearances aside, however, cross-cultural interaction is a two-way street. As I shall show, the arts of Africa have changed significantly over the centuries in response to changing conditions of life. Among the most important changes in conditions, further, were the pressures generated by the development of world capitalism—pressures felt in Africa, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, through the agency of slavery. Capitalistic transformation engendered conflicting traditions (that is, either glorifying or resisting the changes) both in the art of Europe and in the art of Africa. Finally, as modern primitivists drew on African sculpture for inspiration, they drew selectively, and they succeeded in selecting works of art whose meaning was appropriate to their project: they drew on sculpture representing communitarian and antiauthoritarian values, rather than on court art with its hierarchical tradition. Our lesson is that, even when the sculpture was abstracted from its cultural context, form conveyed meaning.

What I suggest, therefore, is that there occurred a meeting of artistic minds at the dawn of this century, as certain European artists, responding to the pressures of capitalist development, sought to delve into the human emotive unconscious rather than celebrate the achievements of the rational mind and of the established order, whose benefits were now revealed to be precarious and oppressive as well as glorious. They turned away from representational art and toward abstraction; they chose African works of art as models and as inspiration for their plunge into abstraction.<sup>6</sup>

Why should the nature of this meeting of artistic minds remain even today so little appreciated? The modern artists themselves failed to explain adequately the assumptions and the meaning of their work, but that is not surprising. Artists speak in code—Picasso was outstanding in this regard, but by no means atypical—and the interpretations of the artists' aphorisms then shift with the winds of esthetic fancy. The more serious hindrance to clarity on the link is that the critics have not understood it; instead, they have stumbled over four major and overlapping problems.

First, art critics—especially those focusing on European art, but even those who study Africa—have been unable to see African culture in historical terms. Second, critics have too often treated the art of Africa or of a given African society in the aggregate, and as a result have given little consideration to the tensions and contradictions in African life and in African art. Third, critics have described the forms of African art, and more recently they have even tried to describe its social function, but they have been unwilling or unable to discuss the social and esthetic meaning of African art. Fourth, the discourse of critics of African art continues to operate

within narrow conceptual limits and with outmoded, misleading terminology. Let us take up these issues in reverse order.

This last problem—terminology—is the most trivial, and yet to address it is to reveal the whole complex of constraints on critics. The terminology utilized to frame the analysis of African art is deeply rooted in evolutionist, Eurocentric, nationalistic, nineteenth-century social and political theory. All of the terms used to describe this art—"primitive," "tribal," "archaic," "African," even specific ethnic designations such as "Yoruba" or "Maori"—limit the precision of artistic analysis, and threaten unendingly to revive racialistic and ethnocentric prejudices. To overstate the point, we have yet to break decisively with the nineteenth-century concept of "the native" (and hence of native society and the native mind) which provided for the generic conflation and dismissal of all non-European peoples. Many conscientious students of non-European art have been sensitive to this issue, but none has yet been able to provide a satisfactory resolution of it.

"Primitivism" or "modern primitivism" is the term now given to the work of artists of the twentieth century who, in seeking a radical simplification of their work and a more conceptual approach, turned for inspiration to African and Oceanic art. These artists, in turn, labeled as "primitive art" the works they studied, copied, and imitated. William Rubin is at pains to show, however, that the term "primitive" did not have the pejorative connotation among the artists that it was to gain later on in the public eye: "primitive" art in the mid-nineteenth century referred to art of the Aztecs, Etruscans, and Egyptians.<sup>7</sup> While it is possible to believe that the modern primitivists saw themselves as inspired by traditions which, while very different, were not inferior or retrograde, it remains difficult to escape the ethnocentric connotations of the term "primitive." We therefore find, in the notes to the Museum of Modern Art exhibit (but not in the two-volume commentary), an intermediate position: the term "primitive art" is now a technical term which refers, through repeated usage, to the art of Africa and Oceania without prejudice.

Specialists in African art, in particular, are reluctant to accept this latter formulation. They too have come up with an intermediary term, "tribal art." This term was recommended by African art historian William Fagg as long ago as 1951.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Biebuyck, in editing a 1968 collection of essays under that title, did much to enshrine the term, but at the same time he delineated its weakness:

There is ample evidence to show that specific categories of art objects or specific art styles are often correlated not with whole

cultures but with particular institutions, such as initiation systems, cults, voluntary associations, restricted belief systems, and myths. These institutions represent only one dimension of the entire culture; sometimes they have a local rather than a pantribal distribution; sometimes they are trantribal.<sup>9</sup>

By the same reasoning, further, the terms "African" and "Oceanic" art on which I have relied in these pages are equally unsatisfactory: the art in question is neither the art of all of Africa, nor all the art of given African subregions.

Rubin introduces yet another term—"archaic art"—which he applies to the "static, hieratic—and often monumental—styles of the court cultures" of ancient Egyptian, Aztec, Inca, Javanese, and Persian art. This leaves the term "tribal" art to refer to art which gave individual carvers more freedom and which served family structures and other local groupings, rather than courts: Rubin attaches the art of Africa and of Oceania to this tradition. This is the art—the abstracted art which Rubin calls "conceptual"—on which the modern primitivists drew for inspiration. The distinction is important, and it deserves a more felicitous terminology. But what Rubin failed to appreciate, as I shall argue below, is that the distinction between court art and noncourt art is to be made *within* the artistic tradition of Africa; the modern primitivists bypassed available models of African court art to focus their interest on noncourt sculptures.

Rubin also relies on a terminological distinction between *influence* and *affinities*—each representing a type of link between African and European art. In some cases, the *influence* of African art on modern primitivism can be documented, as in the cases where the African sculptures owned by the European artists are still on hand, and where the nature of the connection can be shown: Rubin provides a convincing argument that Picasso's metal sculpture *Guitar* (1914) was directly influenced by a Grebo mask in his possession: the eyes on the mask, rather than being recessed, are set at the ends of protruding cylinders; Picasso borrowed from this sculpture the idea of portraying the sound-hole of the guitar as a cylinder projecting from the flat back plane.<sup>10</sup>

The case of *affinities* is that in which European artists created works closely resembling African works which they cannot have known: that is, once the basic concepts of primitivism were established in modern art, they developed with a logic parallel to that of the traditions by which they were inspired. Arthur Danto heaps scorn on the concept of affinities, labeling the pairings proposed in the Museum of Modern Art exhibit to be "as acute an example of museological manipulation as I can think of . . . a ransacking of the ethnographic collections." Indeed, there is little doubt that some of



the affinities proposed are spurious, but the search for real affinities is not thereby rendered invalid, only problematic. Underlying the concept is the notion that a given mode of artistic expression has an internal logic, and that two artists working independently from the same assumptions may achieve results of recognizable similarity—or affinity. Danto doubts that this sort of esthetic logic can be transmitted cross-culturally, but the early modernists did not doubt it. In Picasso's words, according to Rubin, "You don't need the masterpiece to get the idea."<sup>11</sup> Picasso saw a logic to African sculpture, and where creativity relies on a logic, affinities are a necessary result.

To the degree that art critics refuse to discuss the meanings conveyed by African art—perhaps out of exaggerated fear that their conclusions will be imperfect—they abandon responsibility for explaining the mutual attractions of European and African art during this century, except at the most superficial level. Danto's argument that we do not "know the first thing about primitive art" qualifies as know-nothingism, not least because it includes a xenophobic bias. While the generalizations that can be made about African art are far more crude and primitive than the art itself, they represent a more civilized approach than Danto's categorical dismissal. One major tension in the plastic arts of Africa is that which separates the court traditions, glorifying the state and monarchy, from communitarian traditions, reifying the family and the land.<sup>12</sup> The first are hierarchical and rational in content, and representational in form. The second are egalitarian and emotive in content, and abstract in form.

The court tradition in African art is extensive and well documented: Yoruba sculpture (but particularly sculpture of the ancestral Yoruba kingdom of Ife), and the sculpture of Benin, Danhomè, Kuba, and Kongo, all with major kingdoms, dominates much recent work in African art history.<sup>13</sup> Of these, all but the sculpture of Ife were demonstrably accessible to the early modern artists. Yet none of these artistic traditions was an important source of influence on the modern primitivists at the turn of the twentieth century.

A comparison of the exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Center for African Art demonstrates this point. Both exhibits drew on the collections of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (earlier known as the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro), where Picasso made his famous visit in 1907: the Museum of Modern Art got first choice of these, and the Center for African Art drew on the rest. Of the pieces acquired by the Musée d'Ethnographie before 1915 and recently on display in New York, none of those shown at

the Museum of Modern Art derives from the court art of Africa, while several of those shown at the Center for African Art do derive from African courts.

The pieces on display at the Museum of Modern Art were those known to have influenced the modern primitivists. These included, for instance, a series of sculptures known as "Kota reliquary figures" from a stateless area of northeastern Gabon, whose influence on several European sculptors is traced.<sup>14</sup>

The pieces collected before 1915 and on display at the Center for African Art are, one may deduce, those which did not appeal to the early modern primitivists. Among the most notable were two imposing statues captured in the 1893 French conquest of the kingdom of Danhomè (a conquest led, incidentally, by Alfred Dodds, the only Black person of the era to achieve the rank of general in the French army). These statues were exhibited prominently at the Musée d'Ethnographie, and Picasso could not have missed them.<sup>15</sup> A life-size wooden sculpture of Gbehanzin, king of Danhomè, a gift of General Dodds to the Musée d'Ethnographie, represented the king with the body of a man and the head of a shark: this image reflected his epigram that he was "the shark that troubles the bar" at the coast. The statue, while by no means a portrait, does have a martial and hierarchical aura. The other statue from Danhomè, this one over five feet high but made of iron, and retrieved at the moment of conquest by Captain Jean-Baptiste Fonssagrives, is Gū, the god of iron and war. This figure, widely considered to be a masterpiece, is a triumph of *court* art, not communitarian art. It is less literal and more formidable than the statue of Gbehanzin—it held a great sword aloft until the sword was lost on a 1936 visit to the United States—but it serves as well to reinforce martial and hierarchical values.<sup>16</sup> These cases may, to a substantial degree, be generalized: the art of the kingdoms of Ife and Benin centered on portraits of rulers, and the works of Kuba and Kongo sculptors (both peoples with strong court traditions) are, by African standards, representational and realistic.

The communitarian artistic tradition of Africa is represented in such peoples as the Kota, Grebo, Baga, and Dan, for all of whom the state was minimal. More complex cases are the Yoruba and the Bambara, among whom substantial states existed: here the communitarian art which became interesting to European artists was constructed far from the centers of state power. The meanings exposed in this art include references to survival of the family, renewal of the land's fertility, and death and birth. The famous Nimba masks of the Baga people are worn for dances at which men celebrate the renewal of the land for the next agricultural year. The feelings generated by this sculpture are deeper, more symbolic,

and, in a psychological sense, more primitive. They represent magic, but in the sense of linking us to a world greater than we can know or control. To modern primitivists, the forms and the values of this sculpture were more likely to conjure up the uncertain world of Einstein and the later Nietzsche than the ordered and certain world of Herbert Spencer.

The risks inherent in aggregating African sculpture into tribal and pan-African categories (beyond the evident neglect of the genius of individual artists or workshops) now become clearer. Within any African ethnic group, contrasting traditions coexist, though one may dominate. For all of western Africa, the communitarian tradition was so strong and so influential on court art that critics could fail to acknowledge the existence of court art: extension of the term "tribal art" to all African sculpture is the result. At the same time, traditions of court art have influenced the communitarian art of the same and neighboring societies. Thus in Danhomè the court tradition, sustained by insistent royal patronage, dominated all plastic art, and this tradition has survived for most of a century after the fall of the monarchy. Among the Yoruba, a past court tradition—Ife reached its height in the fourteenth century—continues to maintain its influence, while a strong though related alternative tradition is recognizable in the Gelede masks used in social dances.<sup>17</sup> The Grebo of Liberia had a state, but the Poro secret society, which had a dominant influence in public affairs, maintained at least the appearance of an alternative ideology.

Recent work in African art history has tended to focus on the court tradition in African art, or at least on the art of peoples who had major states. Such work represents, in part, a justification of Africa, in that it attempts to set Africa in world perspective by demonstrating that in Africa, too, traditions of powerful states grew up. The exhibit of Asante art at the Museum of Natural History ("Asante: Kingdom of Gold") reflects this emphasis. The contemporary interest in African art is thus qualitatively different from that at the turn of the century.

No Africans, regardless of attachment to their traditions, lived in a historical void. If, as art critics tend to imply, artists in these cultures were sensitive to the needs and values of their contemporaries, it is hard to imagine that these same artists would have been impervious to changing circumstances. While it will be impossible in these pages to bring to life the specific impact of changing circumstances on the minds and the creations of the artists, we can at least summarize some of the changes African cultures have

undergone in the last several centuries, and leave their implications to the reader's imagination. The changes may be divided into two sorts.

In the first type of change, African societies underwent internal transformation and development: these included migrations, changes in economic organization, and long-term development of state structures. In one well-documented case, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, changes in state structure may be related to a changing artistic tradition: the kingdom of Ife, the mythical homeland of all the Yoruba and the fount of all Yoruba thrones, brought forth realistic, bronze-cast sculptures, presumably portraits of its kings and dignitaries, especially from the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. By the nineteenth century the political power of Ife in particular and of the Yoruba kingdoms in general had passed from kings to warlords, and the royal style had disappeared, to be replaced by a more abstracted style whose links to the older tradition are nonetheless obvious.<sup>18</sup> Sculpture from the nearby kingdom of Benin has been known to Europeans since the fifteenth-century voyages of discovery, and a huge treasure trove of Benin art was carried off to England as loot after the 1897 conquest of the kingdom. In this court art, a focus on portraits of royalty and a succession of styles of work in brass and ivory are evident.

The second type of change is that encountered in association with influences from Europe and the wider world. The initial focus of European influence came through trade—purchases of gold in modern Ghana and pepper in Benin—and through Christian missionary work, notably in Kongo. But with the passage of time the slave trade came to be the major conduit for Atlantic contact. For Africans, the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries brought a relentless increase in the volume of slave purchases and distorted the social structures. Few societies escaped reduction of their population or some involvement in enslaving and selling persons; these conditions brought about a particular exploitation of African women. In the nineteenth century the volume of slave exports began to decline, but this only served to expand the supply of and demand for slaves in the African market: African slavery thus expanded remarkably during the nineteenth century. Finally, the European conquests—those same conquests which retrieved the sculptures that so struck the Parisian and Bauhaus artists—ended the era of African slavery, though in a fashion which brought further disorder, new hierarchy, and new oppression.<sup>19</sup>

In the same era, Islamic influence expanded throughout the western savanna and brought with it a universalistic ideology of the state, a well-developed art tradition which rejected idols, and a justification and institutionalization of slavery. The many



sculptures known as Bamana come from an area of the middle Niger valley dominated by Muslim governments for some centuries: they thus reflect the outlook of people who, while regimented by state authority, distinguish their outlook clearly from the official ideology and state religion. Somewhat to the east live the Dogon people, whose sculpture became widely known in Europe in the 1930s and may have been known to the modern artists earlier. The whole existence of these people is caught up in the opposition to state power and to enslavement: they lived in well-defended mountain settlements and their world view, as expressed by the blind elder Ogotemmeli to anthropologist Marcel Griaule, emphasized individual self-expression rather than conformity.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, when the late nineteenth-century Europeans, bowing only in celebration of civilization and the commodity, moved inland to assume control of all Africa, they could label the continent "dark" and untouched only by shielding themselves from the cruel light of reality. On the contrary, Africa had already experienced a commodification—not only of man's produce but of man himself—that in some ways exceeded the development of the market in Europe. As the changes in African life and the influence of external factors were considerable, so would one expect to find changing cultural forms. But the untrained Western eye, responding to an unconscious expectation that any modern cultural transformation will take the form of an evident Westernization, has often mistaken innovative forms in African culture for static survivals: the result instead is survival of the notion of an unchanging, eternal Africa.

An anthropological illustration from very recent times may illustrate this point. At a recent African Studies conference, a young anthropologist gave a paper describing the titles which leading men of Igbo villages in Nigeria achieve through expenditure of monetary and social capital. Then a very senior colleague in the audience interrupted to note that, twenty-five years earlier, these same people had aspired to a completely different set of titles; he asked for an explanation. The young man, who had no knowledge of the change in titles and had nothing to say, thus revealed fully his acceptance of the view of a static, traditional Igbo society.<sup>21</sup> The impact of the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war on this area should have provided him with a hint: perhaps the holders of the earlier titles and the titles themselves were discredited in the course of that struggle.

Critical neglect of the dynamic processes in African art is the result not only of the impermanence of wooden sculpture and the cultural distance of the Western scholars who have dominated the writing of African art history, but of the approach adopted by ex-

perienced and well-informed scholars in the field. Most of the work of art historians of Africa has gone into demonstrating artistic continuities rather than changes. The work of William Fagg on Yoruba and other African sculpture may be summarized in these terms; Robert Farris Thompson has followed a similar approach in his work on Kongo, and his very successful *Flash of the Spirit* serves primarily to document survivals of Africanisms in New World black art. The approach I am suggesting is closer to that of Janheinz Jahn who, in works on literature and on African culture generally, argued that African culture was shaken by the impact of Europe, but that it has modified and reasserted itself in new forms both in Africa and the Americas.<sup>22</sup>

The modern artists of Paris and the Bauhaus intended their art to shock, to simplify, to cause reflection, to penetrate below the conscious level of appreciation, to provoke spontaneity, and to undermine obedience. All this is clear in their manifestos. Their response, crudely, was to capitalism. Picasso might have labeled the African artists primitive, but he saw in them a solution to a problem that was quintessentially modern. Picasso used the terms "exorcism" and "magic" as he entered this stage of his career, and the terms have much to commend them: the term "magic," for instance, should be seen here not to represent conscious control over the world through manipulation of supernatural forces but, on the contrary, a recognition that the world contains much more than the human mind can comprehend, and a search to get in touch with that larger reality rather than seek narrowly to control it by a rational process.<sup>23</sup>

In setting this agenda, the modernists drew on well-chosen African counterparts. But African artists had something to say about the modern world not—as the exhibit guides leave one to conclude—because they were conveniently placed visitors from another planet who by random chance happened to present the solution, nor because they had managed to maintain for themselves an earlier version of the planet with messages which had survived beyond their normal evolutionary time. The Grebo and Dogon sculptors, members of decentralized and antiauthoritarian cultures whose abstract and conceptual art focused on providing sustenance for family life rather than praise for the state, had maintained those values only through centuries of more or less explicit struggle against the antithesis of those values. Picasso and his contemporaries were able to feel that. But in his inarticulate fashion, Picasso never felt the need to go beyond the term "primitive," nor to do his benefactors the honor of learning anything about their culture or conditions.



Picasso, as John Berger has emphasized, relied significantly on the reasoning of Rousseau. Rousseau, of all the Enlightenment *philosophes*, was the one who set forth both the greatest hopes for the future and the greatest ambiguities about what it might bring. As Berger argues, Picasso, along with Rousseau, focused on the contradiction between progress and morality. But the connection between Picasso and Rousseau may also be extended to the African sculptors on whom the modern artists drew. The link of African sculptors to the outlook of Rousseau and Picasso is not the obvious one—the notion that they might be set into Rousseau's logically polar role of the noble savage—but rather that African sculptors found themselves facing the same modern dilemma, and that their creativity produced effective expressions of the tension between progress and morality, expressions which could be translated into forms recognizable by European audiences.<sup>24</sup>

Picasso combined exquisite technical skill with a profound sense of the deepest and most critical transformation in modern society, and with the ability to combine the two in artistic productions that touched an incredibly wide audience. The ironic result of his insight was that he became a star known as much for his name as for his work. In this, as Berger notes, he had no peer except for Charlie Chaplin. Further, Berger argues, Picasso ultimately became so rich that his artistic contribution was vitiated, and after World War II he can be considered an artistic failure in contrast to his earlier success.

Benjamin Bucloh provides a revised interpretation of ironies in the creation of countercultural modern art: he praises Picasso's Cubist period as the real breakthrough to a critical art, and classifies the return to realism after 1915 as a capitulation to the forces of order: the failure of Picasso, then, is moved back to 1915.<sup>25</sup> According to this argument, the dominant tradition had made itself felt during the war years, and perhaps in large part through the agency of war. The irony continues as the countercultural art of the prewar period, art intended to represent a break for freedom from the bourgeois world, came to hang in the salons of the bourgeoisie, and then served to engender an abstract tradition in art which avoided but never challenged the established order.

In Africa, too, art continued to change as the twentieth century advanced. This change was not simply the shattering of the glass as seen by European critics. Some art historians express dismay that the cultures of Africa and the Pacific were crushed by European impact, and that the integrity of their artistic tradition was therefore fractured.<sup>26</sup> Such a view is misplaced to the degree that it reflects an assumption of a pristine and primordial artistic

tradition in the days before the Europeans. Change and adaptation to the challenges of the new industrial order were precisely what the modern artists sought: why should the artists of Africa and Oceania be denied the opportunity and the relevance of a similar adaptation? On the other hand, what the marketplace does to art is not necessarily esthetically or socially rewarding. And while, as Jan Vansina has recently shown, a market for art in Africa was by no means new, the expansion of the market for curios had a deforming influence, as did the impact of artistic traditions dominant in Europe.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one may go so far as to propose a morbid parallel between the slave trade and the new trade in tourist art: just as slave merchants were able to pay a price so high that they induced Africans paradoxically to diminish the value they placed on human life, so the prices paid for art to stock the curio shops of Europe served to devalue the creativity of African art.

Yet this quandary brings us to a parallel and a unity of primitive and modern art, for as the marketplace has threatened the integrity of art in the colonies, so has it threatened (albeit at a much higher price) the integrity of art in the metropole. The anti-authoritarian traditions in both European and African art were, in the years after World War I, increasingly swept into a vortex generated by an expanding market for all things, including art. Yet the notion of the cross-cultural link retains its fascination in a steadily homogenizing world, and the need for an alternative—for an authority other than the state and a freedom other than the market—reasserts itself time and again. Thus African sculpture—and African society generally—is too resilient and too creative to be crushed by foreign occupation, outmoded by technological change, bought up by collectors, or obscured by art critics to the point where it loses all meaning. Surely the same can be said for the art and the society of the North Atlantic.

That African art is forward-looking, even in its celebration of the past, can be suggested by considering the visit of the Asantehene to the opening of the Asante art exhibit in New York. Can his tumultuous welcome in Harlem and his spontaneous response to it be explained by the devotion of American Blacks to an empire extinguished eighty years ago? Is it not easier to understand the excitement as resulting from an increasing self-confidence among Afro-Americans and among Ghanaians—divided by an ocean and by two centuries of history, but linked by ultimate ancestry and by the continuing experience of racial stigmatization and discrimination—that they are achieving a secure place in the twentieth-century world? The court tradition of Asante, presented jointly with the village tradition of Asante in the Museum of Natural History

exhibit—and with emphasis on the *gold*—provides a well-nuanced symbolism. A minority group in the United States, historically oppressed, acts out an antiauthoritarian role by drawing on the remnants of an African court and its art—art which, centuries in development, skillfully splices a communitarian outlook into a court tradition. Somewhat in the form of nationalistic ideology, these forms meld contradictory elements into an appealing whole.

Thus, in a twentieth century we all share, we are forced to continue the search for new cultural forms and relationships in response to the pressures of continuing crisis—the great gulf between North and South, between developed and underdeveloped, between the land of the imperialist and the land of the oppressed; and the gulf between all humankind and the alienation of life under capitalism. But we may now see that, even at the very opening of the century, an attempt was made to create artistic forms that were, in a vague and general (but no less interesting) sense, popular. Despite the continuing limits on our ability to conceptualize this effort to achieve a broad artistic unity which also expressed the needs of common people, artists were in practice beginning to draw the threads of our world together. We are familiar, now that we think of it, with the European side of it. But we may all have much to learn from the creative efforts, then and now, of those at the other extremities of our world.

#### Notes

For helpful critiques of an earlier version of this article, I want to give special thanks to Jon Wiener and Jan Vansina, and thanks as well to Jean-Christophe Agnew, Jane Caplan, Carol Duncan, Marjorie Murphy, Danny Walkowitz, and Mike Wallace.

1. Yve-Alain Bois, "La Pensée Sauvage," *Art in America*, Apr. 1985, 178-89. The *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* gave the show high marks. The *Wall Street Journal* also reviewed the show favorably, but insisted on headlining its article "The Call of the Wild."

2. *West Africa*, 4 Feb. 1985. For a fuller statement of this view, see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America*, Apr. 1985, 164-77.

3. William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in Rubin, ed., "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 vols. (New York, 1984), 1:1.

4. *Ibid.*, 71.

5. Arthur C. Danto, "Defective Affinities," *The Nation*, 1 Dec. 1984, 590-92. For response by the curators to this and other critiques, see Kirk Varnedoe, "On the Claims and Critics of the 'Primitivism' Show," *Art in America*, May 1985, 11-21; and discussions in *Artforum*, Feb. 1985 and May 1985.

6. William Rubin has used the term "conceptual art" to refer to the work of the modern primitivists and the African artists who inspired them, but this term is also used to refer to an art movement of the 1970s.

7. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," 2-3.

8. *Ibid.*, 5, 74 n. 1, 75 n. 24.

9. Daniel Biebuyck, "Introduction," in Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 2.

10. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," 18-20.

11. *Ibid.*, 14.

12. A further great distinction in African art, which overlaps significantly with this one, is that between urban and rural art: cities act to focus long-distance influences while rural areas maintain a local orientation. For more on this and a generally excellent new introduction to African art, see Jan Vansina, *Art History in Africa* (New York, 1984).

13. Two fine works which reflect this concentration are Frank Willett, *Ife in the History of West African Art* (New York, 1967), and Willett, *African Art* (New York, 1971).

14. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," 14-18. Vansina demonstrates the weakness of the ethnic designation "Kota" in this case and suggests in general that the workshop is the proper unit of artistic analysis. Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, 32-33.

15. For descriptions of these pieces, see the Center for African Art show catalog: Susan Vogel and Francine N'Diaye, *African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme* (New York, 1985), 34, 80-81, 137-38. For a photograph of these pieces on exhibit at the Musée d'Ethnographie in 1895, see Rubin, "Primitivism," 126. The kingdom of Danhomè was succeeded by a much enlarged French colony of Dahomey; the latter became the Republic of Benin in 1975.

16. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1982).

17. The recent book by Werner Gillon, while visually impressive, conflates communitarian and court art. In addition, its focus on change is so long-term that considerations of technology displace those of esthetics. For the twentieth century, Gillon seems to accept the notion that true African art has been destroyed. Gillon, *A Short History of African Art* (London, 1984).

18. Willett, *Ife in the History of West African Art*.

19. Patrick Manning, "Contours of Slavery and Social Change in Africa," *American Historical Review* 88, 4 (1983), 835-57.

20. Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, 29; Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemeli* (London, 1965); James W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, 1982).

21. My thanks to Jean Hay for this story.

22. William Fagg, "The African Artist," in Biebuyck, *Tribal Art*, 42-57; Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (New York, 1961); Jahn, *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing* (New York, 1961).

23. This perspective on the term "magic" is inspired by Hugh Kearney's insightful analysis of scientific revolution: Kearney, *Science and Change, 1500-1700* (New York, 1971). For examples of modernist manifestos, see Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, 1968).

24. John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso* (Baltimore, 1965). For an illustration of another practical application of Rousseauian thinking by Africans at the turn of the twentieth century—in this case the notion of the social contract—see Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge, 1982), 210-216.

25. Benjamin H. D. Budloch, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 11 (1981), 39-68.

26. Gillon, *Short History of African Art*, 347-48.

27. Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, 161.