

Preserving the past in a social vacuum

By Philip Monk

Gauguin to Moore: *Primitivism in Modern Sculpture*, a visually stunning collection of 136 modern sculptures, prints and drawings of primitivizing bent that opened this month at the Art Gallery of Ontario, is a heady celebration of a culture that went more than halfway to meet several others. Out of dark and dusty ethnographic cupboards, hidden away among the plunder of Europe's colonial rule, primitive artifacts of Africa and the South Seas emerged as a major influence on the masters and movements of cubism, expressionism and surrealism. Artists such as Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, Amedeo Modigliani, Jacob Epstein and others included in this exhibition were among the first private collectors of primitive art, intrigued by the sophistication, simplicity and energy of these totemic and ritualistic objects. Hewn in wood or rough cut in stone, these pieces reinforced the widespread rebellion against a cloying Victorian sentimentality and the overwrought ornamentation of the polished Beaux-Arts marbles as artists absorbed primitive forms for their own means.

Unfortunately, the resulting modern works, which in their time were rude, audacious jabs at the tradition of Western culture, have been tamed under the glare of gallery spotlights. Unlike these artists—some of whom, such as Gauguin, went halfway around

the world in their pursuit—curator Alan Wilkinson has taken only a few timid steps. He does a fine job of tracing formal similarities between primitive and modern art, of speculating on which exhibitions Picasso may have seen, who visited whose studio. But he doesn't dig for the roots: the artists' complex fascination with and reaction to the industrialization of Western culture, how they used the primitive to grasp the raucous sensuality of urban life. This was a time when artists were drawn to both the simplicity of primitive forms and the mechanical rhythms of industry, transmitting both in their work. But for Wilkinson, these pieces seem destined to rest timelessly entombed, much like Aztec and African art, in a vacuum. Curiously, he repeats history: just as the artifacts were de-ritualized in Western museums, so the social bonds of modern art have been severed here.

Socially, primitivism was the offspring of both colonialism abroad and industrialization at home. Europe's naïve fascination with the exoticism of non-European cultures began with Napoleon's 1798 campaign in Egypt. By the end of the 19th century, primitivism (especially African) symbolized the dark and sensual, demonic and frenzied

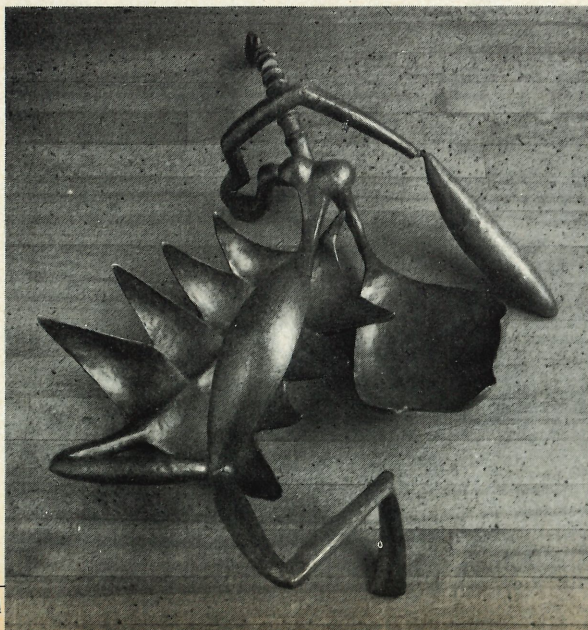


'Hina and Te Fatou': Polynesian gods

in European culture itself: Strauss's Viennese waltzes were criticized as "African and hot-blooded, crazy with life." Even before Gauguin made his 1891 odyssey to Tahiti, a paradise already ravaged by the one he had left, traditional cultures were rapidly disappearing at home as a result of rampant industrialization.

With myriad primitive styles to emulate, the artists could match any of their own eccentricities. Gauguin, who called himself a barbarian and claimed that "the great error is the Greek, however beautiful it may be," eclectically synthesized Christian themes with primitive decorative motifs in pieces such as *Wood Cylinder with Christ on the Cross*. With no Tahitian sculptural models at hand, he liberally improvised the crudely carved but richly sensuous tamanu wood sculpture *Hina and Te Fatou*. Representing the Polynesian gods of Earth and moon, this object had no religious value; Gau-

'Woman with Her Throat Cut'; 'The Kiss': violent sexuality versus eternal coupling



guin had his eyes on Parisian taste.

Again in the 1920s and '30s, the surrealists turned their rapt attention to the Pacific Islands. Alberto Giacometti's sinister and disturbing sculptures of this period are charged with a violent sexuality: the spine of the leaf-like insect creature of *Woman with Her Throat Cut* is arched both in desire and the throes of death. On the other hand, the contemporary lovers of *The Kiss* by Romanian sculptor Brancusi are idyllically fixed in their sexuality for eternity. The monolithic block-like simplicity and rudimentary facial signs, in such contrast to Rodin's sculpture of the same name, used the primitive to speed a rigorous return to the basics of form and truth to the material: wood was wood and stone was stone, not metamorphosed into human flesh.

Strangely, Rodin's work is also included in the exhibition because he modelled a Japanese actress and drew Cambodian dancers, works that had no primitivizing effect on his sculpture. Similarly, the bronze *Kneeling Woman Combing Her Hair* by Picasso is included for no reason other than its similarity in pose to Gauguin's Tahitian relief *Be in Love and You Will Be Happy*. The pieces by Picasso that do have an obvious resemblance to primitive art, such as *Standing Man*, are only exercises leading up to his cubist masterpiece, the painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, in which the artist allied tribal masks with the abstract planes of Cézanne to concoct a searing sexual allegory. But as much as Picasso and Brancusi looked to the past, they saw their own age reflected in the mechanical shafts and smooth bearing heads of the primitive fetishes. Why did Wilkinson not introduce his audience to the complex partnership of primitive and industrial in the birth of the modern age? Why Epstein's primitivizing *Female Figure* and not the mechanized man of *Rock Drill* of the same year?

The vitality of the age pales in this exhibition, one that should have ended with Giacometti's resounding crack of violence. Instead it pulls itself along for one last exhausted hurrah in the elephantine ponderousness of Henry Moore. Having been burdened with the massive Henry Moore Sculpture Centre since 1974, the AGO has a vested interest in the artist's reputation. According to Director William Withrow, Wilkinson was "hoping to fulfil Henry Moore's wish that his last gift would generate interest in . . . the other masters of modern sculpture." Wilkinson merely slots the modern masters securely in the continuity of art history, from prehistoric to present, divorced from their own culture. The sculptures that were to frame Moore's instead are left to dance around his staid stones. ☘

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