

Left: Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O. J. R. version O); right: Mbuya (sickness) mask, Pende Zaire.

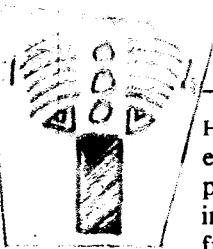
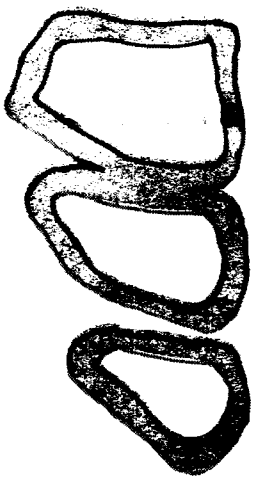


Museum of Modern Art



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THE SPIRIT OF REBELLION AND experimentation flourished in part of the Parisian art scene in 1906 and that vitality was further energized as artists

discovered a new world and a new way of looking at—or at least presenting—their own. One day Matisse, for example, impulsively bought a statue “of Negro origin” at a curio shop he often passed, then stopped by Gertrude Stein’s apartment. Picasso dropped in. It was the first time he had seen African sculpture. Later Picasso by chance wandered into the Paris ethnographic museum established a couple of decades earlier. It was, he said, an experience of “shock,” “revelation,” “charge” and “force.”

Since then the encounter of modern artists with the work of “tribal” or “primitive” arts has offered continual and varied inspiration. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has traced this history in an exhibit that is stunning, not only for the range of modern works of excellent quality and frequently even more impressive primitive masterworks but also for the revelations of links between the primitive and the modern.

After the exhibit closes in January, it will travel to Detroit and Dallas. But it has also yielded for anyone a beautiful, encyclopedic and exciting two-volume, 689-page catalog (\$80 hardcover, \$30 softcover) edited by William Rubin.

European interest in the cultures of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, as well as the complex civilizations of Asia, grew with the age of exploration but was especially spurred by 19th-century colonialism.

The encounter produced widely disparate reactions: in the main Europeans saw these new people, their ways of life and their works of art as savage, in the pejorative sense, and showed contempt for them, frequently destroying their arts in the process of subjugating them. But for others, “primitives” were a variant of the exotic, the intriguing, the novel.

The more certain Europeans tried to assimilate rather than destroy these cultures and images, the more they had to accommodate to them. That inevitably brought about a new sense of themselves and their own traditions.

Often Europeans simply projected their

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In searching to understand themselves through an alien other, artists often identified with their fantasy of the primitive.



PRIMITIVE

INSPIRATION