Primitive Art's Influence on Modern Art

"Primitivism" can be defined as the "interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture, as revealed through their thought and work" (Rubin 1). The term refers not to the art itself, but to the Western interest and reaction to the art (5). Over and over again, modern artists have drawn on the powers of tribal and primitive art because they are attracted to it authentic, timeless, magical, and innocent ideas -- values most artists felt were fading in the West. Relationships often exist between twentieth-century art and primitive art, whether it is an affinity or a literal borrowing from the past (Stevens 92). Some influences are absorbed, invisible, spiritual, and cannot be exhibited; others can be seen clearly in the artist's work (93). Losing faith in Western art traditions, many artists searched for something pure and real, something to redefine the true nature of art. Many, such as Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, and Frank Lloyd Wright found this in the ancient art of the primitives.

"In no other artist's career has primitivism played so pivotal and historically consequential a role as in Pablo Picasso's" (Rubin 241). With a continuous presence of tribal objects in his studio and his work from 1907 until his death, Picasso is described as the "key protagonist" of 20th century primitivism. Picasso's childhood was bourgeois and conventional, with a respected traditional artist and art professor as a father (241). Picasso began to view the art of his childhood, as well as the art of society as no longer viable or true, so he took it upon himself to provide new alternatives. Before 1906, Picasso began moving in a different direction from tradition by celebrating the outsiders of society in his work: the poor, the blind, the old, and the rejected. Finally, in June of 1907, Picasso had an "epiphany". After a yearlong evolution in

his works, called the "Iberian" style, triggered by the Archaic Iberian relief exhibit at the Louvre, Picasso entered into "his first stage of primitivism" (242). Many of the African pieces he began to see had origins several centuries old, associated with early civilizations and a simple model of the world, something Picasso was looking to portray in his art (243). An example was "Guitar," the first of Picasso's Cubist sculptures, which was made of sheet metal and directly influenced by an early Grebo mask (18). Then, Picasso's work, "Two Nudes," was painted at the end of 1906, and is now known as the end of his Iberian phase and the beginning of something new for Picasso. Over the next few months, Picasso began to flatten and simplify the Iberian figures in his works (247). Though the "Two Nudes" is not as primitive as Picasso's work of next 2 years, it has a rawness and simplicity that shows his important step in that direction (248).

Late in 1906, Picasso began sketches of his most famous work, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (251). The painting appeared in its first Iberian form in late May and June of 1907. However, in late June and July, Picasso made many changes to the left and right side of the painting, where the inception of his tribal phase occurs (253). In the first stages, the scene was a narrative of a doctor and a sailor with a venereal disease. This seemed to depict Picasso's own fears and concerns with the diseases. After completing the first Iberian version of "Demoiselles," Picasso visited the Palais du Trocadero, and finally the Musee d' Ethnographic wing, devoted only to African and Oceanic sculpture (254). The gallery was in bad shape and Picasso could wander freely. Picasso claims that given his initial disgust with the gallery, his first instinct was to flee. For some reason though, he could not take eyes off of the tribal material, so he remained there for quite some time. He later described the visit as something disturbing happening inside of him; he was experiencing an epiphany, a "shock," and a "revelation." He was instantly drawn to the "magical" conception of the art in the tribal masks

and sculptures he saw, as well as the reductive, ideographic character of the works. He understood the logical and conceptual sense of the tribal art, and it appealed to him (255). His reaction to this visit inspired many second works of "Demoiselles." Critics proposed the reason for the changes to be that Picasso was attempting to transform his work from the narrative to the iconic and abstracted, as he had seen in the tribal work. He wanted to recapture the meanings through style, instead of illustration, making it more profound and generalized (252). "Demoiselles" marked the final stage of Picasso's transition from perceptual to conceptual, clearing the way for Cubism's development in later years.

The mystical roots of tribal art were the central feature in Picasso's revelation (255). The African art moved Picasso to a rediscovery of art making as "magical" and pure. He loved the African art because he found it "raisonnable," as a result of the reasoning process, making it conceptual (18). Picasso wanted modern art to share the universal quality that he found in tribal sculpture, and as a result, Picasso's primitivism broadened the Western language of art (53). By the end of 1907, had given primitivism a new, twentieth-century definition, anchored in tribal, not exotic, objects and an appreciation for their "magical" and artistic force (242).

Another example of the influence of primitive art forms on modern art can be seen through the work of Henry Moore, one of the most prominent British abstract sculptors of the 20th century. Moore had many non-western influences throughout his career, but the most important and influential was that of Pre-Columbian art. He first encountered this art style while a student in art school and almost immediately began using it for models in his work. During the 1920s, Moore began to explore sculpture more seriously, following the basic rules: unity of the aesthetic experience and permission to search the world for different models (“Henry” 94). While attending the traditional art schools, Moore catered to the demands of the classical

coursework, but decided to pursue his real education elsewhere, seeking an alternative to the classical traditions. Moore thought of Greek and Roman sculpture as the enemy, and desired to "start again" like the primitives. The art of ancient Mexico grabbed his attention the most and began to greatly form his views on carving and sculpting (95). The Aztec sculptures had cubic shapes and features, which are subordinated into a whole, symbols which are relayed through various reliefs, and a bareness of surface - - all characteristics Moore could appreciate in sculpture. Pre-Columbian art became his primary model, and after spending much time in the libraries, pouring over books and photographs, he advanced to become a scholar of ancient Mexican sculpture (97). In 1921, he began drawing and sketching ideas for different sculptures. In these drawings were many copies of Pre-Columbian and primitive artwork. His first modernist carvings were executed in 1922, along with his first 3-D sculpture, "Mother and Child." This piece displays a great awareness of a similar Aztec seated figure. With characteristics of geometric simplification, muting of incidental details, and a formal clarity, this piece certainly points the ancient Mexican ideas (98). Between 1927 and 1930, Moore carved more than a half a dozen masks based on Aztec models, using museums and books as his sources. In fact, a number of his masks seem to be direct translations of the images found in the books. His work always seems to possess certain qualities commonly attributed to traditional ancient Mexican culture art such as: symmetrical order, cubit units of mass, division of large planes, and especially the obscuring of unnecessary detail into the whole. Moore found the ancient Mexican art to be "true and right," something he believed had been lost in the Western classical tradition (107).

In 1928, a major turning point occurred in Moore's work, sparked by the commission to create a relief figure for London's new Underground office building called the "West Wind."

This piece was Moore's first effort at public art, causing him to rethink his style in larger terms, different from his earlier intimate and smaller works. At some point in the figure's conception, Moore turned to Pre-Columbian sculpture for inspiration, focusing on the Mayan Chacmool, a common reclining figure on its back, with its head at a right angle to its body and its legs drawn up, often associated with temple doorways and seats of authority (112). The "West Wind" came to be a blocky, angular, geometric, flattened, boldly simplified sculpture, solely based on the Mayan pieces (114). The Chacmool was the most important influence on Moore, but other references to Pre-Hispanic forms exist in his work through the 1950s (120).

The primitive influences not only affect visual arts, such as painting and sculpting, but forms such as architecture as well. Frank Lloyd Wright, the leading American architect of the twentieth-century, loved to use a combination of new and old, gaining much of his inspiration from Pre-Columbian architecture from the Mayans and Indians. Though Wright never actually traveled to Mexico or Central America, he was constantly alert to the Pre-Columbian architectural style and method. It is recorded that he had a childhood infatuation with Pre-Columbian architecture, and had his first true encounter with it in the 1880s at the Chicago School of Architecture where he saw huge casts and monuments of the Mayan style. Around 1887, he joined the firm of Adler and Sullivan, who was known for his use of ornament inspired by nature and the exotic. Sullivan soon became Wright's mentor and caused Wright to really search outside the classical tradition for new models ("Frank" 137). He was drawn to the Pre-Columbian ideas that were elemental and natural in form and material, as opposed to the artificial classical traditions he was used to (140). After 1910, Wright turned to Pre-Columbian concepts in a major way, using ancient buildings as prototypes for a series of experimental designs, but also using new materials and much architectural ornamentation (143). The Midway

Gardens of 1914, an open-air Chicago music hall and restaurant, was an example of Wright's turning to Mayan architecture for inspiration. His first dependence on Pre-Columbian forms, scattered throughout the garden, are the concrete decorated blocks, elaborated with designs and geometric patterns inspired by Mayan ornaments (145). Wright experimented with concrete as a building material while using the Mayan models, since the Mayans had regularly used concrete cement as their building material. Using this substance, he could create smooth or textured surfaces, and even convey sculptural volumes, like architects in the Mayan culture had done. The A. D. German Warehouse in Richland Center, Wisconsin, used as a storage space for commodities, is another good example of Wright's Pre-Columbian inspired buildings. Designed in 1915 and constructed between 1917-20, the building was the first time the overall configuration of Wright's building was Pre-Columbian, from the large rectangular blocks, to the divisions of a highly decorated zone and an undecorated lower zone. Wright even used Mayan models for exterior layout (148).

Between 1916-22, Wright accepted a commission from Aline Barnsdall to build an elaborate complex on a hill in Hollywood, CA. This was Wright's first domestic design using Pre-Columbian sources. The house resembled a temple, adopting the shape from Mayan Peten style temples. With much ornamental design and use of the hollyhock (Barnsdall's favorite flower), the home came to be known as the Hollyhock house (150). After the Hollyhock house, Wright built four more Pre-Columbian based residences, later known as "textile blockhouses." These textile-block houses were representations of Maya ruins, but with hopes of developing a system of construction for the new machine age, one that's efficient and economical, but also ornamental (156). Wright's interest sparked a new Pre-Columbian style in southern California and other areas of the US during the late 1920-30s. Bossom, Miller, Pflueger, and Judd were all

architects following his lead, designing private and public buildings, residences, hotels, shops, civic centers, skyscrapers, etc. One of the most noted followers was Frank Wright's son, Lloyd Wright. He embraced his father's ideas and goals strongly, and declared own interest in Pre-Columbian architecture. His best example is seen in the 1926 John Sowden House in LA, where the younger Wright used adaptations of the ancient Yucatan Mayan Temples (166). Frank Lloyd Wright believed the Mayan designs to have a certain spiritual value and mystic feeling that he desired in his work. He thought they better grasped the geometric sense of form with symbolic meaning, and in essence, captured the "core of reality" (173).

As William Rubin states, “ours is the *only* society that has prized a whole spectrum of arts of distant and alien cultures” (41). These examples are only a few of the many people that have been influenced by primitive art and methods. More than anything, primitivism has played huge role in the shaping and transforming of various modern art forms of the twentieth-century. It is understood that primitive objects have had less to do with the redirecting of modern art, than the reinforcing of changes and ideas already underway in the artist’s mind and in today’s world (Rubin 17). Society was looking for something new and better - - something unlike the traditions of the western world. Primitivism surfaced at a time when society needed it to, and remained a constant influence throughout the twentieth-century.

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