

## The Idea of the Primitive: British Art and Anthropology 1918–1930

The idea of the primitive has long been a potent and highly influential current in British thought and history.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the period 1918–30 saw primitivism established as an important theme in writing on art and anthropology. Analysis of the concept may therefore usefully begin there—with a span of time seemingly unitary enough to justify a synchronic treatment. The war deeply affected the nature of the concept, in particular the perception of the existence of savagery beneath a civilized exterior, the definition of barbarism on racial grounds, and the construction of an image of the British working-class fighting man. It also ushered in a new economic and colonial era. At the end of the period, the Depression marked another economic phase characterized by intellectual radicalism. Between these two events many factors remained stable: economical and political debates, the retreat of the avant-garde, and attitudes to colonialism that to some extent defined views of the primitive.

To attempt to define the primitive in a priori fashion, before looking at how the concept was actually used, would be to arrive at a transcendent and ahistorical definition. We should rather look at the concept as it operated in the writing of this period.

The word 'primitive' is frequently used of artistic work produced by people in the following groups: the naive, the savage, the insane, the child, folk, medieval. 'Savage' art includes work from contemporary and prehistoric societies and ancient civilizations. 'Folk' art includes peasant and proletarian art of European countries. Writers often make simple comparisons between the areas, as these two observations by art critics show: 'Here is a case... of a child of twelve... being moved to produce art as fine, in essence, as that of Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, Giotto, and some other few examples of primitive inspiration.'<sup>2</sup> '[Le Douanier] Rousseau is the folk painter, and he has the aspiration of the peasant... The Gothic peasant does not lie far below the skin of the bourgeois.'<sup>3</sup> These comparisons are at once all-embracing and elusive. The child's work is like Botticelli's—in essence; Rousseau is actually a peasant—but only beneath a petit-bourgeois exterior. How do such comparisons work? What do the various aspects of the primitive have in common? Is it to do with the essence of the art, the character of the artist, or the quality of the execution? Often it is simply the soul of the artist. Given a similarity in the groups of souls, minds or natures, a similar art naturally and directly results. In primitive art the relation between conception and execution is supposed to be unproblematic and direct in a way that is not true of more civilized work.

Likewise, children's art and savage art are similar since they are both based on the incapacity associated with growing up: 'All children have passed through from the primitive achievements of the most primitive of the Ur-folk.'<sup>4</sup> This assumed identity between ontogenesis and phylogenesis is a commonplace of the psychology and anthropology of this period. The art of the insane was thought to be similar in this respect. Often the similarity is to do with simplicity, naivety or honesty, qualities that express themselves in the final product as much as in the artistic process: 'The carver of idols is, without doubt, the most scrupulous of realists. He works with almost the same delicious naivety as Rousseau, who before painting a full-length of the poet Alfred Jarry, carefully measured him with a pocket-rule, after the fashion of a tailor.'<sup>5</sup> When primitive art was discussed, there was generally an erosion of the usual distinctions made in art criticism. The relations between the soul of the artist and the essence

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Chris Green and Jill Lloyd for their help and criticism.

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Manson, 'The Drawings of Pamela Bianco', *The Studio*, vol. 77, 1919, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Gordon, *Modern French Painters*, London 1923, pp. 96, 98.

<sup>4</sup> A.S. Levetus, 'Prof. Friedrich Thetzer's Drawing Class at the Hyrtl Boy's Orphanage at Modling near Vienna', *The Studio*, vol. 95, 1928, p. 261. See also Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, London 1919, pp. 50, 56 for analogies between the child, the neurotic and the savage; p. 62 on the similarity of 'dreamers, children and savages' in attitudes to the dead.

<sup>5</sup> André Salmon, 'Negro Art', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 36, 1920, p. 166.

of the work, between the quality and type of the execution and their expression in the work, are taken to be unmediated and direct.

So we can begin to make some sense of the concept of the primitive as used in the 1920s as being centred on the capacities and characteristics of a certain type of mind. However, many attempts were made to split open the category, to divide off one or more of its facets or to challenge its coherence altogether, not least by positing the existence of an exclusive, true or essential primitive. So the anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers thought the concept should be restricted to the most primitive people (in the sense of being the lowest down on the 'evolutionary ladder') that we know of. These would be the closest we can get to the true primitive, the first people.<sup>6</sup>

### The Avant-Garde

More important is the dispute over whether to include in the definition members of the avant-garde who take the primitive as their subject or idiom. Much of this controversy was centred on Gauguin because of his primitive subject matter and assumed life style. Wyndham Lewis stated one side of the argument: 'Gauguin was not an artist-type. He was a savage type addicted to painting. He was in reality very like his sunny friends in the Marquesas Islands. He was in as limited way a savage as an American Negro. Such people are savages who go in for art for motives of vanity or of undisguised sex.'<sup>7</sup> Jan Gordon expressed the opposite view: 'I think he was too civilized. He was so civilized that he could regard this civilization as a fraud. Whereas to the savage it is a heaped marvel.'<sup>8</sup>

It was generally praise to identify some aspect of a modern, self-conscious artist with the primitive, but it was something else for the identification to be made complete. Thornton and Gordon thought Gauguin and Van Gogh were primitive and unbalanced, the latter so seriously that his work contained symbols showing a regression to the primitive life of the race.<sup>9</sup> C. Hercules Read went further, in characterizing much avant-garde work as a 'pathological return to the crude and rudimentary conditions of barbarism'.<sup>10</sup>

While only denigrators of the avant-garde made identifications of modern art with the primitive absolute, nevertheless equations between the categories of the primitive stated earlier were frequently made by all kinds of writers, even the more liberal anthropologists. Those who opposed these equations, like Lewis, and Fry's associate,

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<sup>6</sup> W.H.R. Rivers, 'The Unity of Anthropology', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. LI, 1922.

<sup>7</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'The Caliph's Design. Architects! where is your Vortex?' (1919), in Walter Michel and C.J. Fox, eds., *Wyndham Lewis on Art. Collected Writings 1913-56*, London 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Thornton and Ronald Gordon, 'Art in Relation to Life, I', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 39, 1921, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> C. Hercules Read, 'Primitive Art and its Modern Development', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. XLVIII, 1918.

Clive Bell, tended to do so not because they disagreed with the thinking behind them, but because they opposed the positive connotations that often accompanied them. Bell, for instance, airing his racist views, satirized the identifications commonly made: 'It was delightful for those who sat drinking their cocktails and listening to niggerbands to be told that, besides being the jolliest people on earth, they were the most sensitive and critically gifted. They, along with the children and savages whom in so many ways they resembled, were the possessors of natural, uncorrupted taste.'<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to make sense of the concept of the primitive by reference to features of the works of art themselves—which ranged from prehistoric cave paintings to the airy pieces of the child artist, Pamela Bianco; from Giotto to Melanesian carving; from the work of the Douanier Rousseau to traditional peasant costumes. It is more instructive to concentrate, as most of the writers of the period did, on the people instead of the products.

The primitives are people dominated by power: of the contemporary primitives, 'savages' lived under colonial administrators; the insane under the administration of the asylum; children under their parents; folk and naive artists are members of a lower class than those that appreciate their work. So Roch Grey wrote of Henri Rousseau: 'His art, though it sprang from the People, could never make an appeal to other than the loftiest and most sensitive intelligence.'<sup>12</sup> The French critic, Maurice Raynal, in a work translated into English, described French naives, underscoring their class credentials, their ticket to naivety, by way of their former trades: 'The *douanier* Rousseau has been followed by other artists: . . . the farmer Utrillo . . . , the *terassier* Bombois, Boyer the *marchand de frites*, . . . the chimney-sweep Emile Gody.'<sup>13</sup>

Of the primitives of the past, medieval artists were less artists than artisans—craftsmen doing a job. Prehistoric and ancient peoples were considered similar to modern savages: socially, racially and morally inferior. This was reflected in the organization of art histories, where 'savage' and prehistoric art were placed together, out of the chronological order otherwise strictly adhered to.<sup>14</sup>

Social relations, rather than features of works of art, determined what was called 'primitive' and what was not. These relations determined the attitude taken to the art of governed races abroad, governed classes at home, and governed individuals in the family.<sup>15</sup> It also determined the interpretation of history.

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<sup>11</sup> Clive Bell, *Since Cézanne*, London 1923, p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> Introduction, *Paintings by Henri Rousseau 'Le Douanier'*, Lefevre Galleries, London, 1926.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Raynal, *Modern French Painters*, trans. R. Roeder, London 1926, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> For example Martin Conway, 'From Alpha to Omega' (review of *History of Art* by Joseph Pijoan), *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 50, 1927, pp. 160–61.

<sup>15</sup> See Vivian Osborne, 'The Sculpture of Katherine Maltwood', *The Studio*, vol. 87, 1923, pp. 197–9; and Stephen Gwynn, 'The Art of Miss W.M. Geddes', *The Studio*, vol. 84, 1922, pp. 208–13.

## The Association with Nature

Assertions of similarities or identification between animal and vegetable forms and primitive works of art were frequently made. When the comparison is with plants, growth is often the most important feature of the supposed similarity. 'Art . . . can be drawn out of each individual child; made to flourish in much the same way as a flower, starting from a seed that is properly taken care of, breaks through the earth and bursts into bloom.'<sup>16</sup> The flower is the passive object of our contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment. When primitive art is associated with animals, vitality and fertility are usually the bases of the comparison.<sup>17</sup> One of the most important anthropologists of this period, Bronislaw Malinowski, in criticizing James Frazer's 'vitalist' view of primitive religion, captured the general attitude: 'We are left with the impression that religion is teeming with the forces of savage life, with its young beauty and crudity, with its exuberance and strength so violent that it leads now and again to suicidal acts of self immolation.'<sup>18</sup> The analogy with vegetable growth explained complexity without consciousness. The analogy with the animal explained vitality and fertility as a matter of pure instinct. So the status of the art work is changed. Wyndham Lewis wrote of the Moroccan Kasbah that it 'is as much a work of nature as a hive or anti-city.'<sup>19</sup> These analogies allow the civilized observer to admire primitive art without extending this admiration to its creators.

As with art, so with life. The primitive is always seen in an unmediated relationship to nature. This idea is expressed in many paintings that show 'savages' in idealized settings, lacking the modern and colonial features that were certainly apparent. Those influenced by the aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer, however, including T.E. Hulme<sup>20</sup> and Herbert Read<sup>21</sup>, opposed any analogy between vitalism and primitivism. Most notably, Wyndham Lewis, criticizing most modern art, proposed a return to older values: 'Deadness is the first condition of art. The armoured hide of the hippopotamus, the shell of the tortoise, feathers and machinery, you may put in one camp; naked pulsing and moving of the soft insides of life . . . that goes in the other camp.'<sup>22</sup> He put this lifelessness into practice in painting his *Tyros*—beings that appear human but which are at once a form of brute nature and a display of complete exteriority.

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<sup>16</sup> Anon., 'Studio Talk: Save the Children Fund Exhibition', *The Studio*, vol. 80, 1920, pp. 193–4. And of the child artist, Bianco: 'She has developed entirely in her own way, as a flower grows from bud to blossom, without the blighting influence of school of art education. [Her drawings . . .] These beautiful things, sweet and untrammelled as childhood, seem effortless creations. One sleeps in the night and morning, Lo! the rose has bloomed.' Preface, *Babes and Fairies*, *Drawings by Pamela Bianco*, 1919, Leicester Galleries, London.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Holbrook Jackson, 'Studio Talk: Belfast', *The Studio*, vol. 90, 1925, p. 260, on the animal 'vitality' of 'elemental folk'; Editorial: 'A Word for Caliban', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 40, 1922, p. 157, on the 'amazing prolificness' of 'native art'; Albert Rutherston, ed., *Jacob Epstein*, London 1925, p. 9, on the 'virility' of primitive art.

<sup>18</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Magic, Science and Religion' (1925), in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, London 1948, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, 'The Kasbahs of the Atlas' (1933), in Michel and Fox.

<sup>20</sup> T.E. Hulme, *Speculations. Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, London 1924, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> W.B. Honey, 'Our Stained Glass', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 50, 1927.

<sup>22</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*, London 1918, p. 303.

## The Unconscious

The critic Clive Bell described self-consciousness and the critical spirit as one of 'the last acquisitions of humanity'.<sup>23</sup> It was a central concept in differentiating the civilized and the primitive. The notion of the primitive unconscious operates at different levels. Firstly, primitive art is unconscious because the relationship between vision and representation is direct. For R.H. Wilenski, negro sculptures 'are the result of direct reactions to the naked human body', their creators being able to perceive their subject 'as though nobody had perceived it before'. In fact their vision was so direct that when modern sculptors looked at negro work, 'they felt as Ruskin felt when after days spent in drawing the facades of Venetian palaces he saw daggerro-types of those facades for the first time.'<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, there is a direct relationship between the primitive artist's sensibility and its expression: 'The work is . . . the direct expression of the sensibility of the mind, fresh and immediate, with no other thought than that of the joyous expression of the fancy which seems to bubble up irresistibly from the well-springs of its nature.'<sup>25</sup> This is partly a matter of the supposed lack of intellectual input in primitive art. Fry wrote of the perception and creation of mental images in the Bushmen: 'The retinal image passed into a clear memory picture with scarcely any intervening mental process.'<sup>26</sup> Because of this lack of intellectual input, many aspects of primitive art were thought to be involuntary. Fry wrote that if a Neolithic man tried to make an objective record of his sensations, his 'habits of thought intervened, and dictated to his hand orderly, lucid, but entirely non-naturalistic forms'.<sup>27</sup> Not only the type of the art (non-naturalistic) but its quality (orderly and lucid) is withdrawn from the person of the primitive artist and 'explained' by the fundamental nature of man. A consequence of this view is the idea that the primitive lacks any real appreciation of his work, and perhaps that its qualities are mere accidents.

Some writers thought that unconsciousness in primitives extended not just to certain stages of the creative process, but to their entire culture. W.H.R. Rivers actually equated conscious primitive cultural activity (such as dances and ceremonies) with the unconscious activities of the civilized. The savage had no more idea of the meaning of his culture than we do of our dreams.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Freud: 'There is no sense in asking savages to tell us the real reason for their prohibitions—the origin of taboo . . . they cannot answer, since their real reason must be "unconscious".'<sup>29</sup> The primitive, then, lies in remote places, in different times,

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<sup>23</sup> Clive Bell, *Civilisation. An Essay*, London 1928, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> R.H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, London 1932, pp. 141–2.

<sup>25</sup> Manson, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, London 1920, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Carveth Read, 'Review of "Dreams and Primitive Culture" by W.H.R. Rivers', *Man*, vol. XIX, 1919, pp. 108–10.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 31. This work of 1913 was first published in Britain in 1919. It was widely discussed among anthropologists and was particularly important for Malinowski. See his *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, London 1927, preface and pt.

but also at the base of our 'civilized' minds, so discoveries about it can be made by introspection. Thornton and Gordon wrote that the artist 'whose door to the unconscious mind is wide open' can recover 'primitive mental material' consisting of 'half formed vague chaotic aspirations . . . shadowy memories and experiences of the race.'<sup>30</sup>

Because primitive art was thought to be created directly, dishonesty could find no place in it. Honesty may be reflected in the life of the artist or it may be a feature of the race. Since the primitive artist works in an essentially unconscious manner, honesty is less a virtue than an imperative. This is also the case with 'truth to materials', the respect of the artist for the medium used and the responsibility to use techniques appropriate to it—an issue widely discussed among modern sculptors at the time. As with honesty, the primitive artist's truth to material was thought to be due partly to modest ambition and intellectual capacity, partly to the strong ties of tradition. It was never a matter of conscious choice. The 'negro' sculptor 'was content in his work to emphasize the elementary facts that a head resembles a box, the trunk and limbs resemble cylinders, and to let his material shape his conception.'<sup>31</sup> The absolute distinction between primitive and civilized was maintained when modern artists decided to work within the limits of a single material or technique, for instance when Henry Moore concentrated on carving; for the civilized artist it was always a matter of choice, never an imperative.

Other conventions were supposed to bind the primitive artist. Many anthropologists saw people in primitive societies as entirely ruled by the conventions of religion or magic or by the social collective: 'In nearly all primitive races we find . . . that the mentality is stable, fixed and almost invariable, not only in its essential elements, but in the very context and even in the details of its representations.'<sup>32</sup> The essential conservatism of primitives was a truism in the thought of this period. The construction of a complete network of convention guiding the artist's every move made primitive creation seem effortless. Again, credit for conscious activity was removed from the artist, and the primitive art work became essentially a product of nature.

## Change

There was a view of savage society and art as essentially unchanging, as a passive object of our knowledge. One art critic described Russian peasants as 'primitive people, whose life and feeling are the same as that of thousands, of millions, before them, beside them and after them.'<sup>33</sup> If there is apparent change, it is a surface effect. For the novelist Edith Wharton, North African civilization was a matter of 'perpetual flux and immovable stability'.<sup>34</sup> In this view, any essential change is inexplicable.

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<sup>30</sup> Thornton and Gordon, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> W.G.C., 'Monthly Chronicle: Negro Art', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 38, 1921, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, London 1926, p. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Dresdner, 'Ernest Barlach', *The Studio*, vol. 92, 1926, p. 341.

<sup>34</sup> Edith Wharton, *In Morocco*, London 1920, p. 127.

When change was conceded to have taken place in primitive society it was usually seen in terms of evolutionary steps with long periods of stasis between progressions. This unilinear conception of human evolutionary development was applied by some to the interpretation of art, as well as to social and religious change. This permitted the ordering of peoples into a rigid hierarchy and provided an ideological justification for colonialism, since a 'civilized' administration could be seen as encouraging trends towards higher development, as parents do with their children.

However, the diffusionist theory of change was more influential in Britain, especially after the defection of W.H.R. Rivers from the evolutionist camp in 1911. On this view, all change in society takes place by influence, invasion, or immigration from outside. Inventions are rarely made twice, so the course of primitive history can be reconstructed by tracing different cultural elements back to their diverse sources. All change was a matter of 'grafting'.<sup>35</sup> Diffusionist theory claimed to provide a firm link between ancient civilizations—sometimes designated primitive—and modern savages. The theory had a racist dimension, particularly in its implicit reduction of civilization to a single source. The effect of diffusion was a kind of evolution, as 'superior' ideas, inventions and cultures were adopted or enforced on the inferior. For instance, we are told that all Eastern sculpture owes its 'being' to the 'fructifying influence' of Alexander's conquests.<sup>36</sup> Wharton went as far as to state that 'it is not in Morocco that the clue to Moroccan art is to be found.'<sup>37</sup>

### Form and Content

There were a few attempts to define the primitive by addressing the works of art directly. These tended to be fragmentary and contradictory. Wilenski believed that primitive sculpture had various non-aesthetic functions, but thought that ancient Egyptian sculpture's 'non-sculptural meanings seemed to be expressed by *means of the formal meaning*.'<sup>38</sup> This formal meaning he described as the animation of basic geometrical volumes, which made the work relevant to modern sculptors, especially to Moore.<sup>39</sup> Other writers, notably Clive Bell, believed that primitive art was essentially a matter of decoration: an

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<sup>35</sup> Ancient South American civilizations provided problems for diffusionist theory. It seemed incredible that Mayan culture could have developed without outside influence, that it appears 'to spring full-blown from the earth' (Cyril G.E. Bunt, 'American Art in the Burlington Fine Arts Club', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 37, 1920, p. 40). The simplest answer was that there had in fact been influence. Fry thought that it had come from East Asia, while that most extreme of diffusionists, Eliot-Smith, thought he could see elephants in Maya carving, thus proving the link (Fry, 'American Archaeology', in *Vision and Design*, and W. Percival Yetts, 'Elephants and Maya Art', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 45, 1924, pp. 262–9). The development of the same complex weaving techniques in Europe and America made the problem particularly acute. See Bunt, 'Studies in Peruvian Textiles', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 32, 1918, pp. 109–12.

<sup>36</sup> A.G.B.R., 'Review of "Sculpture in Siam" by Alfred Salmony', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 48, 1926, p. 214.

<sup>37</sup> Wharton, p. 199.

<sup>38</sup> Wilenski, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

art of the surface, incapable of profound depth. No coherent theory emerged from this view, except perhaps that primitive art was based on technical and utilitarian determinants. One of the few serious attempts to define primitive creation by its characteristics was Roger Fry's theory of conceptual notation, which stated that primitive art was dominated by the concepts of language.<sup>40</sup> The primitive image was a set of tokens containing information. So features corresponding to well-marked concepts in language (such as eyes, horns and tail in an animal) would be over-emphasized.<sup>41</sup> However, there was no attempt to explore concepts in different languages and to see whether representations corresponded to conceptual differences. Fry thought the acid test for his theory was that the greatest degree of conceptualization was found among 'the lowest of savages . . . the least civilizable . . . regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes'.<sup>42</sup>

The idea of the importance of the sign in primitive life was a common one. Wyndham Lewis wrote: 'The peasant, or any person living under primitive conditions . . . is surrounded by signs, not things.'<sup>43</sup> For Rivers, the symbolization found in the dreams of the civilized occurred in the waking lives of savages.<sup>44</sup> Fry's theories were part of a broad current of opinion that saw primitive mentality not as more truthful than the civilized, but as more completely governed by mental concepts expressed in language. Although the object of the theories was the works of art themselves, in presenting evidence for them the focus shifted to extrinsic factors.

Primitive art was generally supposed to be reliant on an external and non-aesthetic function. One reason was the widely held idea that primitive peoples were completely dominated by utilitarian concerns. The celebrated anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown, thought that his subjects had 'no interest in nature save in so far as it directly affects social life'.<sup>45</sup> Primitive art was supposed to fulfil various overlapping functions. One was the creation in the viewer's mind of an unconscious and impressionable state—which one writer compared to that created in a sleepless child counting sheep.<sup>46</sup> Another was the illustration of religious meaning, a feature often presented as an inescapable imperative. For most writers though, primitive art acted as a kind of magic. This was particularly true of interpretations of cave painting. Lewis's belief that all art was a product of magic was extreme, but it was nevertheless a development of the dominant opinion. Associated with this view that art was 'the civilized substitute for magic'<sup>47</sup> was the idea that primitive art was used in (generally unspecified) religious or magical ceremonies. For instance, Wilenski tells us that

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<sup>40</sup> Fry, p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

<sup>43</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'The Carnac and his Wife' (1927), *The Complete Wild Body*, Santa Barbara 1982, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> Carveth Read, p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge 1922, p. 379.

<sup>46</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, 'Arabic Art in Egypt', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 36, 1920, p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, 'The Dithyrambic Spectator' (1925), in Michel and Fox.

masks from Sierra Leone were used to terrify novices at the 'initiation into the mysteries of sex'.<sup>48</sup>

It was also thought that primitive art had a function in maintaining social cohesion. Dancing, for instance, encouraged discipline, physical coordination and social solidarity. In all cases, though, primitive peoples were ignorant of the 'real' use of their art. Aesthetic merit becomes a mere by-product of some utilitarian factor of which the artist may not even be aware. This attribution of specific functions to art was often pure speculation: debates about whether paleolithic cave paintings were magic aids to hunting, or were representations of the caveman's heaven, were based entirely on ignorance.<sup>49</sup> For us, it is the limited choice of options picked for discussion that is important. The primitive, as seen by the civilized, was caught up in a net of basic and unexamined assumptions which quite fully determined what could and what could not be seen and said.

### The Influence of Colonialism

The period after 1918 is often seen as a time of uncertainty for British colonialism. Woodrow Wilson's support for national self-determination, the refusal of parts of the Empire to provide Britain with military support in the Charnak incident, the problems in Ireland, and the massacre at Amritsar, fuelled a degree of misgiving about the political, if not the economic, benefits of the Empire. These factors should be seen in the context of the nation's economic decline<sup>50</sup> and the outright opposition to colonialism from communist labour at home and abroad. Colonialist views became the target for ridicule in some circles. Wyndham Lewis received a letter from A.J. Symons signed 'George R.I.'. It ended: 'P.S. Would Mr Lewis come to lecture the Indians on The Art of Being Ruled?'<sup>51</sup> They don't quite seem to understand their advantages at present. P.P.S. Would Mr Lewis care to be Viceroy?'<sup>52</sup>

Behind this kind of satire lay serious concern about the effects of the Empire on the people it governed. It is easy to overstate this side of the case however. The opposition view was in a minority, and should be set against the continuing tide of pro-imperialist propaganda produced by institutions (the Royal Empire Society, the British Empire League, the Victoria League), magazines (such as *The Round Table*), and the popular press, particularly the *Daily Express*.<sup>53</sup> The imperialist hero—the district officer or missionary—was still a popular stereotype. Travel literature contained a great deal of pro-imperialist writing, while in the art journal these views dominated criticism. One critic wrote of the Empire Exhibition at Wembley of 1924: 'It is said that the supreme significance of the British connection in India is to help modern India to recover the glories of her ancient culture. In the sphere of art, the sleeping Princess is opening her eyes to the golden touch of

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<sup>48</sup> Wilenski, p. 138.

<sup>49</sup> Leonard Tristram, 'Paleolithic Cave Paintings', *Man*, vol. XXXIII, 1923, p. 184.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, *Crises in the British State 1880–1930*, Birmingham 1985.

<sup>51</sup> The title of a politically conservative book published by Lewis in 1926.

<sup>52</sup> c. 1928. From W.K. Rose, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, London 1963, p. 184.

<sup>53</sup> James Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets. An Imperial Retreat*, London 1978, p. 313f.

British sympathy.<sup>54</sup> Some works of art acted directly as carriers of imperialist ideas. One of the most significant examples was Lutyens's city of New Delhi, an embodiment of Empire that carried imperialist slogans engraved into its walls: 'Liberty Does Not Descend To A People. A People Must Raise Themselves To Liberty. It Is A Blessing That Must Be Earned Before It Is Enjoyed.'<sup>55</sup>

The extent of the success of this view is reflected in social anthropology, which accepted colonialism, although it criticized the details of some policies. In the 1920s the discipline began to claim a role in advising colonial administrations. This change was perhaps a result of the threats and uncertainty to which colonialism was subject. Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown believed that anthropology should be an instrument of colonial policy. It should 'provide a scientific basis for the control and education of native peoples'<sup>56</sup> and 'help the white man to govern, exploit and "improve" the native with less pernicious results to the latter.'<sup>57</sup> Anthropologists were closely involved with governed peoples, but rarely analysed the economic activities of the Empire. In their view, if cultures were destroyed and injustices done, it was the result of incompetence or misunderstanding, never of deliberate policy based on fundamentally opposed interests.

The nature of these interests was recognized on a more abstract level. A virtually universal feature of the idea of the primitive, stressed by writers, was its vulnerability, and the likelihood, if not certainty, of its demise. The primitive and the civilized were of course seen as opposites: contact between them meant contamination and the destruction of the weaker. There was general agreement on the end result: 'a top hat clapped on to the head of a cannibal'<sup>58</sup> and 'the nemesis of the black man in a tall hat—neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring! . . . from the aesthetic point of view the savage deteriorates under the influence of Western civilization.'<sup>59</sup> Culturally, the primitive is vulnerable because he is unconscious: 'Once let the black or the peasant become acquainted with the showy utensils of industrialism . . . and, having no critical sense . . . he will be bowled over for a certainty. He will admire, he will imitate, he will be undone.'<sup>60</sup> The destruction was seen to operate on many levels, affecting every aspect of primitive life that could be the subject of civilized aesthetic enjoyment. The art of any individual child was seen to be under a similar threat as it grew up—it was generally assumed that a child's art would be better, within certain limits, at a younger age.<sup>61</sup> This feeling lent a sense of urgency to the accumulation of data and objects concerning the primitive, especially among

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<sup>54</sup> O.C. Gangoly, 'Modern Indian Art in Wembley', *The Studio*, vol. 89, 1925, p. 145.

<sup>55</sup> Morris, p. 375.

<sup>56</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'The Present Position of Anthropological Studies' (1931), *Method in Social Anthropology*, London 1958, p. 93.

<sup>57</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, London 1926, p. xi.

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Anon., "'The People of the Small Arrow", Drawings by Miss Pearl Binder', *The Studio*, vol. 95, 1928.

<sup>60</sup> Bell, p. 116.

<sup>61</sup> An opinion stated in, for instance, 'Studio Talk. Save the Children Fund Exhibition'.

anthropologists. The danger of disappearance was part of the justification for the intrusion of the scholar, the removal of artefacts, and the reduction of peoples to objects of knowledge.

The widespread sense of loss, the opposite of the dread of otherness and of absorption, was based on the supposed primitive in us all: the bourgeois yearning for innocence, for contact with nature and with instinct and the unconscious, for lost skills, for old school days, and against the barriers formed by the intellect. But this yearning for what James Frazer called 'the springtime of the world'<sup>62</sup> was always tempered by practicalities, and a realization of the advantages and the superiority of the civilized. It remained part of an insulated aesthetic experience.

## Race

The issue of race was of primary importance in the concept of the primitive. For some it was the determining factor: Wyndham Lewis described the 'negro' as 'racially a sort of Proletariat'.<sup>63</sup> Various kinds of racial description, all concerned with classification into types, tended to merge into each other. Ethnographic literature was the most concerned with gathering precise physical data and creating a structure of racial differences against which any individual could be definitively placed. Differences in the structure of the skull were considered particularly important. The information was gathered around a variety, or rather a progression, of racial types. One ethnologist, Myres, hoped that racial classification of character would proceed so far that you could 'refer a given individual to his racial type, if you met him in the dark'.<sup>64</sup> Anthropology was less concerned with the gathering of precise racial data, but racial descriptions of a more general kind were seen as important. These were similar to those in picturesque travel and art literature. Just as colour is crucial to the literature of the picturesque, so it is in racial description. The concern is not simply the classification but the instant recognition of racial types: 'The Jew dresses in *Black*, the Arab in *White*, and the Berber in intermediate colours (*Brown* predominates in the North, *Blue* in the South). The Negro dresses like the Berber peasant.'<sup>65</sup> Painting was of course the perfect medium for the illustration of these differences.

This kind of racial description was very widespread and completely accepted. Both those who praised primitive racial qualities, and the outspoken proponents of white supremacy and eugenics, lay outside this persistent and institutional racism, but both groups accepted its fundamental tenets. The system of racial classification extended to Europe where its primary determinant was class. In Britain

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<sup>62</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edn, London 1922, p. 424.

<sup>63</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface*, quoted by Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis*, London 1957, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> J.L. Myres, 'Correlation of Mental and Physical Characteristics in Man', *Man*, vol. XXIII, 1923, p. 118.

<sup>65</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Filibusters in Barbary' (1932), *Journey into Barbary. Morocco Writings and Drawings*, Santa Barbara 1983, p. 45.

immediately following the war, the image of the proletarian male was generally favourable: the unchanging British soldier, descendant of the bowman of Agincourt, is supported by his 'silent pride of race'.<sup>66</sup> This did not last long. Industrial disputes, the threat of army revolt and police strike, and the militancy of the unemployed-workers movement quickly ended the honeymoon period. The ethnologists Bradbrooke and Parsons searched the Chilterns for 'dark folk in isolated hamlets'. They failed to find any, but their data led them to believe that the indigenous population of the hills was darker than the average in England, and 'that this darkness is due to the survival of a greater proportion of Neolithic or Mediterranean blood in the district.'<sup>67</sup> Similarly, an examination of skulls in London uncovered evidence of neolithic survivals in the East End.<sup>68</sup> If the peasant and the proletarian were designated primitive, the reason was at least partly their place in racial classification.<sup>69</sup>

Race was thought to determine character and morality as much as physical features.<sup>70</sup> Naturally, then, race is also a determinant of aesthetic sensibility. T.E. Hulme's recasting of Worringer's aesthetic categories was based upon racial difference.<sup>71</sup> Herbert Read wrote that due to their nomadic origins, 'the Semites . . . are not expressive at all in plastic modes . . . Relatively speaking, there is no Jewish art.'<sup>72</sup> British attitudes to the depiction of other races in art were clearly revealed in the extreme reactions to Epstein's sculpture. Epstein himself admitted that pieces like *Lydia* or *Daisy Dunn*, which were busts of black women, were 'purely traditional and European in technique',<sup>73</sup> but they were characterized as primitive by critics. Perhaps Europeans found the pieces objectionable precisely because they treated their black subjects as individuals in a genre generally reserved for portraiture. His sculptures *Night* and *Genesis* were described as 'Mongolian', while his statue of Christ came in for particularly heavy attack for not looking European enough. Epstein wrote of this reaction to *Night*: 'It apparently always strikes people as unpleasant and peculiar to portray a being so alien to the appearance of a Briton.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> 'The British Soldier'. An Exhibition of pictures by Eric H. Kennington, preface by Robert Graves, Leicester Galleries, London, 1921.

<sup>67</sup> W. Bradbrooke and F.G. Parsons, 'The Anthropology of the Chiltern Hills', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. LII, 1922.

<sup>68</sup> F.G. Parsons, 'On the Long Barrow Race and its Relationship to the Modern Inhabitants of London', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. LI, 1921.

<sup>69</sup> Bolshevism was also associated with primitivism: Epstein's 'primitivist' work, *Rima*, was branded Bolshevik when it was publicly exhibited; R.R.T., 'Shorter Notices. "Rima"', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 47, 1925, p. 337; and A.R.A., letter, 'Rima', and the reply by R.R. Tatlock, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 48, 1926, p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> Myres (ibid.) suggested an experiment in racial 'moral tone' by 'marooning, let us say, Robinson Crusoe on one island, and Ah Sin on another, and (after sufficient purgatory) exposing both to similar moral temptations, by floating ashore a negress, or a cask of whisky.' The suggestion may not be entirely serious, but the mentality it illustrates is real enough.

<sup>71</sup> Hulme, p. 88.

<sup>72</sup> Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, London 1931, p. 158.

<sup>73</sup> Jacob Epstein and Arnold L. Harkell, *The Sculptor Speaks. A Series of Conversations on Art*, London 1931, p. 94.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

## Sex

One of the most important features of the primitive was the view taken of its relationship to sexuality and morality. It was defined in an inverse relationship to civilized sexuality. Either primitive sexuality was natural and moral, and civilized sexuality was degenerate and immoral, or vice versa. The former view was put very effectively by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead in her 1928 study of Samoa.<sup>75</sup> Mead's view was that of a society free from the sexual guilt and moral constraints of the West: 'Familiarity with sex, and the recognition of a need to deal with sex as an art, have produced a scheme of personal relations in which there are no neurotic pictures, no frigidity, no impotence except as the temporary result of severe illness; and the capacity for intercourse only once a night is counted as senility.'<sup>76</sup> This attitude precluded our idea of romantic love, which was 'inextricably bound up with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, jealousy and undeviating fidelity'.<sup>77</sup> Malinowski's conception of social activity among young Melanesians as a 'happy, free, arcadian existence, devoted to amusement and the pursuit of pleasure'<sup>78</sup> has some points of similarity with Mead's descriptions. These views were shared by some artists, notably Eric Gill who thought that savages regarded god as 'the fount of love'.<sup>79</sup> Some of his engravings, such as *The Dancer* and *The Juice of my Pomegranates*, both of 1925, contain scenes of unrestrained sexuality in primitive or ancient settings.

Primitive sexuality was often seen to be free and uninhibited because it existed in a state of nature. For Wilenski, savage sculptors, unlike the degenerate Greeks, 'saw only sexual and not sensual meanings in the naked human body, and the expression of those meanings was not trammelled by outside prejudice or inhabited from within.'<sup>80</sup> Again, a perceived quality of primitive art is explained by the absence of an attribute of European art.

In Freud there is an almost complete identification of the sexual with the primitive: 'Primitive men and neurotics attach a high degree of valuation—in our eyes an over-valuation—to psychical acts. This attitude may plausibly be brought into relation with narcissism and regarded as an essential component of it. In primitive men the process of thinking is still to a great extent sexualized.'<sup>81</sup> Freud believed that the first act of culture, of cooperative action, was the rebellion of a group of youths, expelled from the 'primal horde' by a patriarch who was enforcing his exclusive access to the females. The youths killed and ate him. The origin of totemism was the expiatory meal which

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<sup>75</sup> Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Harmondsworth 1943. This work was taken seriously at the time, but it is now clear that Mead arrived at a view of Samoan sexual mores that is virtually a reverse image of reality. See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa*, Harvard 1983.

<sup>76</sup> Mead, p. 124.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>78</sup> Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, London 1929, p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Thorp, *Eric Gill*, London 1929, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Wilenski, p. 144.

<sup>81</sup> Freud, p. 89.

commemorated the act.<sup>82</sup> This notion of the natural state was based on psychological concepts, particularly the Oedipus Complex, which had been deduced from sessions with European patients. This was the basis of Malinowski's criticism: 'It is easy to perceive that the primal horde has been equipped with all the bias, maladjustments and ill-temperers of a middle-class European family, and let loose in a prehistoric jungle.'<sup>83</sup>

Freud's theories shared features with influential ideas about primitive 'group marriage'. The lowest primitive state was supposedly a kind of sexual communism, which gradually evolved through matriarchy into a patriarchal monogamy. As Malinowski put it: 'One school, and a very powerful school, believes in group marriage, that is, in a state when individual marriage was unknown and instead of that human beings were sexually united into group marriage—something very immoral, terribly prurient, in fact, so unthinkable it has never been clearly defined!'<sup>84</sup> Accounts of sexual communism are common. The idea of an evolution of sexuality and morality was deeply ingrained in thinking about the primitive. One of Freud's followers, Ernest Jones, approvingly described patriarchy as 'the taming of man'.<sup>85</sup> This view of the moral corruption of the primitive led to prudery regarding its artefacts. Wilenski tells us, after describing a piece of African sculpture at length, that he cannot reproduce it because 'the view which best displays its character is not suitable for a book designed for a mixed English-speaking audience.'<sup>86</sup> Salmon described the literal emasculation of certain pieces of African sculpture by collectors: fortunately, he wrote, this can be done without damaging the works, since the parts in question are 'accidental, not essential, to art'.<sup>87</sup>

The view of the immoral natural state contrasted with a civilized morality is structurally close to its opposite. The judgement may differ but the terms of description are the same. Given that the primitive is defined in terms of difference, any view of primitive sexuality may well be determined by the view taken of civilized sexuality and morals. The issue of sex was one of the central points about which the concept of primitivism operated. The debates about corruption and morality were linked with political and social concerns about the physical degeneracy of the nation, its fertility and population, which were given added urgency by wartime casualties. Venereal disease was seen as an agent of degeneracy, its incidence being an index of national immorality.<sup>88</sup> Sexual licence was an issue of racial efficiency as well as morality.<sup>89</sup> For some, primitive sexuality was a genetic, moral and racial threat which lay beneath the skin of our civilization.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 140ff.

<sup>83</sup> Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, p. 165.

<sup>84</sup> Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, p. xxxii.

<sup>85</sup> Ernest Jones, 'Mother Right and the Sexual Ignorance of Savages', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. VI, 1925, p. 130.

<sup>86</sup> Wilenski, p. 141n.

<sup>87</sup> Salmon, *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Lucy Bland, "'Cleansing the Portals of Life": The venereal disease campaign in the early twentieth century', in Langan and Schwarz.

<sup>89</sup> Caroline Rowan, 'Child Welfare and the Working Class Family', in Langan and Schwarz, pp. 226–7.

## The Picturesque

Picturesque descriptions of primitive peoples spanned many types of writing, and formed the basis for huge numbers of representations in the visual arts. The character of the primitive is expressed entirely on the surface: primitive people are unknowing works of art, suitable subjects for artist and writer. The most common element of these descriptions is literally local colour. A description of a harem from Edith Wharton's book about Morocco is a typical and eloquent example of this genre: 'As the young things moved about us on soft hennaed feet, the light played on shifting beams of gold and silver, blue and violet and apple-green, all harmonized and bemisted by clouds of pink and sky-blue; and through the changing group capered a little black picaninny in a cafton of silver-shot purple with a sash of raspberry red.'<sup>90</sup> Colour is a surface phenomenon, a secondary sense-perception, a product of our minds as much as of light. To concentrate on colour was to concentrate on the surface and on the subjective: surface became essence.

Descriptions that concentrated on colour were found in art-historical,<sup>91</sup> literary and anthropological writing. Generally, the primitive is given an aesthetic value. Sometimes this attitude led to a curious confusion of people and art works, to a description that crossed seamlessly from one to the other: 'These Highland people in their cream and buff kilts woven from the wool of their goats, their check plaids over their shoulders, their curious horned headdresses and their thick black ropes wound round their ample waists, move across the pale green hollows of the upper margs, behind which again a touch of silver on the sharply pointed peaks represents the Himalayan snows. At work or at play, migrating from place to place, or beating furiously on their big kettle drums at the characteristic Gaddi festivals, the colouring of these big pictures is quiet and subdued.'<sup>92</sup> There was almost no opposition to this barrage of writing obsessed with colour and ornament.

The attitude of travellers, and the circumstances of strangers in 'primitive' countries, affected what they brought back in terms of knowledge and art. A common complaint was the overwhelming 'curiosity' of indigenous peoples, which made it impossible to proceed quietly with art or study. The painter, Ellis Silas, found that he could not work in the Trobriand villages due to the attentions of the inhabitants.<sup>93</sup> This perhaps determined the distance of the painter from his human subjects as they appear in his pictures—remote figures in natural settings. Another artist, working in Palestine, hired a 'boy' to keep the crowds at bay, and related stories of artists set on and assaulted by their subjects.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Wharton, p. 138.

<sup>91</sup> Some of the colour descriptions used in art journals may be due to the prevalence of black and white illustrations. However, the descriptions are used when colour illustration occurs.

<sup>92</sup> Constance M. Villiers-Stuart, 'The Last of the Rajput Court Painters', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 48, 1926, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Ellis Silas, 'Papuan Paintings', *The Studio*, vol. 91, 1926, pp. 38–43.

<sup>94</sup> M.K. Hughes, 'Impressions of Palestine', *The Studio*, vol. 73, 1918, p. 6.

'Primitives' often made difficult sitters. It was this, and the language barrier, which T.E. Lawrence thought had made Eric Kennington turn his Arab subjects from individuals into types.<sup>95</sup> Conditions for painters in India were described as 'sufficiently objectionable to outweigh . . . the diversity of picturesque subjects'. Fast work or a good visual memory were needed to overcome 'the eternal heat, the almost overwhelming curiosity of native crowds and the reluctance of street characters for public posing.'<sup>96</sup> Mental constraints were just as powerful as physical ones. For Wharton in Morocco: 'All these many threads of the native life, woven of greed and lust, of fetishism and fear and blind hate of the stranger, form . . . a thick network in which at times one's feet seem literally to stumble.'<sup>97</sup>

Preconceptions of a colourful, picturesque primitive life regularly led to disappointment. For Silas, 'the villager presented but few of the qualities that go to the making of a picture.'<sup>98</sup> While a few travellers claimed to have found the true 'gorgeous East' where all was colour, most brought back their picturesque visions from 'a land of mud and dust, of dogs and donkeys, fleas and flies . . . above all a land of smells, all pervading and defiling high heaven'.

The picturesque primitive allowed interpretations to be made merely by the examination of signs inscribed on its surface. For Wharton, 'the bending of passages so characteristic a device of the Moroccan builder, is like an architectural expression of the torturous secret of the soul of the land.'<sup>99</sup> Art, literature and anthropological knowledge all make representations of the primitive, and in building up its picture they share certain characteristics. This was particularly true of the new social anthropology. Firstly, the representations were static. The idea of unchangeable primitive society governed the form of its representation. Radcliffe-Brown concentrated on 'salvaging' static forms from the changing colonial present.<sup>100</sup> In general, exclusive reliance on field-work data implied synchronic study. Secondly, the picture was limited or framed. Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown studied island societies that could be seen as discrete entities. Thirdly, representations were made to reveal essences. Radcliffe-Brown hoped to discover the 'essential significance' of various customs;<sup>101</sup> Malinowski, the social rationale behind them. In the 1920s both allowed a preconceived and unexamined concept of the primitive to govern their work.<sup>102</sup> So knowledge of the primitive was built up just like a picture would be: static, limited and essential.

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<sup>95</sup> *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Arab Portraits by Eric H. Kennington*, preface, Leicester Galleries, London, 1921.

<sup>96</sup> L.M. Gander, 'W.S. Bagdatopoulos', *The Studio*, vol. 93, 1927, pp. 99–100.

<sup>97</sup> Wharton, p. 112.

<sup>98</sup> Silas, p. 38.

<sup>99</sup> Wharton, p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, London 1969.

<sup>101</sup> Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists. The Modern British School*, London 1983, p. 43.

<sup>102</sup> Both later admitted this by denying the coherence of the concept. Radcliffe-Brown called it 'a great obstacle to scientific thinking in anthropology' (*Method in Social Anthropology*, Chicago 1958, p. 80).

## Art as Knowledge

The scholar's study of the primitive was a matter of breaking down barriers, of intruding and penetrating. This applied even to sensitive and sympathetic studies of the 'savage'.<sup>103</sup> Painting and drawing could serve this intrusive role, like photography, acting as bearers of knowledge. So W. Langdon Kihn's detailed pictures of North American Indians, 'quite apart from their undoubted aesthetic quality, contain enough material to be of genuine help to scientists and ethnologists.'<sup>104</sup> The artist by introspection can distil the essence of a type, can divine the features of a racial psychology, without specialist knowledge.

Similarities in the format of artists' drawings of primitive people and ethnographical illustrations suggest a common concern with the description of racial type. Epstein's sculpture, *Girl from Senegal*, was described as being 'expressive of racial psychology'.<sup>105</sup> His works were often discussed in terms of the knowledge they conveyed and illustrated. Another artist, Alexander Iacovleff, who painted portraits of North Africans, attempted 'the translation into graphic form of the character of the various ethnic types which he encountered. This character is shown in physiognomy, in attitude, in gesture . . . he had endeavoured to penetrate analytically back to the permanent types of the various races.'<sup>106</sup> These pictures are 'ethnographic syntheses' which brought to the surface racial characteristics for examination, classification and judgement. Knowledge of this type is a product of power, and its objects are dominated by power. Children were used as the objects of experiments to classify their aesthetic sensibilities by age, class and education.<sup>107</sup>

The most important reason for examining the primitive was to arrive at self-knowledge, for the primitive was at once a part of 'our' origins, and a negative image of our present state. Fry regretted the destruction of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations, since 'they would have been for us the opposite point of our orbit; they would have given us a parallax from which we might have estimated the movements of . . . the social nature of man.'<sup>108</sup> It was the hope of the social anthropologists to produce universally applicable social laws. Their detailed field studies did not preclude comparisons between societies, although they did work against simplistic ones. Radcliffe-Brown, at least, saw himself as laying the groundwork for a new science that would have practical applications in social control.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Malinowski apologized for the absence of explicit photographs of sexual practices in his *The Sexual Life of Savages*, implying that he would have used them if they could have been obtained (p. xlviii).

<sup>104</sup> L. Richmond, Indian Portraits of W. Langdon Kihn, *The Studio*, vol. 90, 1925, p. 345.

<sup>105</sup> Albert Rutherford, ed., *Epstein*, London 1925, p. 26.

<sup>106</sup> M. Valotaire, 'Alexander Iacovleff', *The Studio*, vol. 92, 1926, p. 308.

<sup>107</sup> Margaret Bulley, 'An Experiment', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 35, 1919, 162–6; and 'The Child and Art: an Experiment', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 43, 1923, 179–84.

<sup>108</sup> Fry, 'American Archaeology', in *Vision and Design*, p. 155.

<sup>109</sup> A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'Method in Ethnology and Social Anthropology' (1923), in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society. Essays and Addresses*, London 1952, p. 18.

## Difference and Otherness

There was a general consensus that primitive people lacked intelligence and knowledge. For instance, Frazer opined that there was an association between savages and 'ignorant and dull-witted people everywhere'.<sup>110</sup> Others made this association a matter of definition: 'Any widespread gap in knowledge, any universal absence of information, any general imperfection of observation found among native races must, pending contrary evidence, be considered primitive.'<sup>111</sup> Only within this framework could the primitive's aesthetic sense be credited: 'The mind of the primitive was, of course, of very limited capacity, but, it was a human mind and, therefore, capable of artistic perception.'<sup>112</sup> Many refused to allow primitives even this status. Bell thought that 'negro' art was essentially inferior to the best of European art.<sup>113</sup> Very few writers denied this identification of the primitive with the simple. Those who gave primitive artists any credit, however unqualified, for their work should be seen against the mass of writing that denied it any merit whatsoever. For many writers, most notably the French anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl, there was an absolute difference between the way the primitive and the civilized minds worked. The savage was the negative image of the civilized, and all that was said of savagery was determined by this opposition.

Opposed to this idea of total difference were the social anthropologists who saw primitive mind and society as much like those of the civilized. Although they rarely challenged the use of the concept itself, their theories, especially those of Malinowski, were directed against dangerous generalizations about the primitive.<sup>114</sup> Malinowski also specifically attacked the theories of Lévy-Bruhl, criticizing the idea that 'primitive man has no sober moods at all, that he is hopelessly and completely immersed in a mystical frame of mind'.<sup>115</sup> Some of Radcliffe-Brown's writing had the same aim. This view fitted in with the contemporary formalist trend to deny all but technical differences between the arts of different periods, allowing aesthetic and stylistic influence to flow freely.<sup>116</sup> It was also informed by the notion, especially current after the war, that the primitive was inherent in us all. For some writers, it was inherent in our history: Frazer wrote that the civilized are like savages and owe much to their 'savage forefathers'.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps savagery is 'beneath our feet—and not very far beneath them—here in Europe at the present day, and it crops up on the surface in the heart of the Australian wilderness and wherever the advent of a higher civilization has not crushed it underground.'<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Frazer, p. 16.

<sup>111</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Baloma, the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands' (1916), in *Magic, Science and Religion*, p. 234.

<sup>112</sup> The Lay Figure, 'On the First Causes of Art', *The Studio*, vol. 86, 1923, p. 362.

<sup>113</sup> Bell, *ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Kuper, p. 25f.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>116</sup> As suggested in 'Monthly Chronicle. Ancient Art', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 37, 1920, p. 209.

<sup>117</sup> Frazer, p. 161.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Perhaps it is inherent in our very nature. C. Hercules Read tells us of American prisoners of the Indians, freed from civilized convention, gladly turning savage.<sup>119</sup> We can even find the traces of the primitive in our bodies: Lévy-Bruhl described how the anthropologist Cushing, working among the Zufii Indians, learned their sign language and ‘revived the primitive functions of his own hands living over again with them their experiences of prehistoric days’.<sup>120</sup> Along with this identification with the primitive, with the idea that it might be civilization, not savagery, that is vulnerable, went the fear of absorption. Lewis was particularly fearful of this: ‘We have been . . . driven down into our primitive mental caves, of the cave-men of the new mental wilderness.’<sup>121</sup> This kind of attack was directed particularly against modernism.

Behind all the representations of the primitive, we should see their consumers: the aesthete, the connoisseur, the scholar. This type of ‘civilized man’ is the exact opposite of the primitive—reasonable, balanced and cultivated. The primitive was thought to pose a danger to the civilized. Many saw war as a manifestation of savagery; others thought revolution was the major threat to civilization. For the most paranoid, such as Lewis, the Other were in alliance. He wrote of D.H. Lawrence: ‘(1) The Unconscious; (2) The Feminine; (3) The Communist; those are the main principles of action of Mr Lawrence linked in a hot and piping trinity of rough-stuff primitivism and freudian hot-stuff.’<sup>122</sup> Lewis’s associate, Roy Campbell, saw the attack as being centred on the head of the bourgeois family, the centre of intellect itself: ‘Nearly all modern writers are out to humiliate the conscious white ‘self’ in favour of the savage, the woman, the child, or even the animal.’<sup>123</sup> The worst of it, as far as these proto-fascist writers were concerned, was that the threat was internal; the white man was ‘going native’ or being hypnotized by feelings of inferiority. They characterized such attitudes as ‘nothing but a pathetic diffusive expansion towards some Otherness’.<sup>124</sup> This otherness was centred around people who could be seen as objects: as an unchanging part of nature, as unconscious, as part of a mechanistic utility. Details of power relations governed representations of the primitive quite precisely.

### Primitivism in Europe

While in other European countries the concept of the primitive shared many of the characteristics outlined above, there were nevertheless significant differences; these can only be hinted at here. France, a colonial nation and a victor in the war, was analogous to Britain in many respects. The cult of the primitive was if anything more marked, and major articles on primitive art were carried in journals like *Documents* and *Cahiers d'Art*. As we have seen, the

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<sup>119</sup> C. Hercules Read, ‘Primitive Art and its Modern Development’.

<sup>120</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, p. 161.

<sup>121</sup> Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Values of the Doctrine Behind “Subjective” Art’ (1927), in Michel and Fox.

<sup>122</sup> Lewis, *Paleface*, p. 180.

<sup>123</sup> Lewis, ‘Filibusters in Barbary’, p. 47.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

views of major French critics like Maurice Raynal and André Salmon were published in Britain, and fitted in well with the general opinion there. Also, the work of Lévy-Bruhl in anthropology and Piaget in the study of children had much influence in positing a completely distinct primitive mind in both countries, and this is a mark of their similarity. However, France was different in having an art movement that was allied with Communism, and had arrived at this position through opposing imperialism. The organization by the Surrealists of an Anti-Colonial Exhibition in 1931 to counter the official show, was a sustained example of this attitude. The Surrealist view of the primitive was informed not only by Freud but by Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget, and shared some of the features of the liberal British one. In general the Surrealists avoided the use of the term 'primitive', and valued research into specific myths and religious practices: the point of such research being the light shed on the human psyche. Georges Bataille did his best to erode the distinction between the civilized and the primitive, in articles in *Documents*.

In Germany the situation was very different, since the cult of the primitive was largely a prewar phenomenon associated with Expressionism. This was a time of imperialist expansion for the German Empire, abruptly ended by defeat in the war. A view of the degeneracy of urban life and of a contrasting idyll of healthy outdoor activity was prevalent from the early years of this century. However, the idealist view of the primitive was subject to criticism even before the war. Many of the hopes of Expressionism were tied to those of political revolution, and when this failed the movement quickly became discredited. In the postwar period, far less attention was paid to the primitive, and where it does appear it is often in an ambiguous guise.<sup>125</sup> The journal of anthropological and archaeological art, *IPEK*, was set up in 1925, however, and had considerable influence in France and Germany.

The concept of primitivism is still current, and in the main is treated uncritically—as is shown, for instance, by the recent catalogue from the New York Museum of Modern Art on the subject.<sup>126</sup> Through Moore's interest in primitive sculpture, and Nicholson and Wood's discovery of the Cornish naïve painter Alfred Wallis, the concept came to have great prominence in British art. It formed a kind of pole, or as Fry put it, a 'parallax', against which everything else was judged. The concept was closely linked with an idealistic notion of Nature. This has manifested itself not only in landscape work but also in abstract pieces, such as the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth, which takes its inspiration from natural forms, and its techniques (direct carving) from so-called primitive sources. However, looking back to the history of the concept in the 1920s, we might ask whether there is in fact anything in it that we want to keep for our own use today.

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<sup>125</sup> For an analysis of the prewar period in Germany, see Jill Lloyd, 'Primitivism and Modernity: an Expressionist Dilemma', *German Art in the 20th Century. Painting and Sculpture 1905–1985*, Royal Academy, London.

<sup>126</sup> *Primitivism in the 20th Century. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York Museum of Modern Art 1984.