

Summary

The Concept of „Primitive Art“. Discovery, Acquaintance and Domestication of the Other in the Western World

Among many concepts existing in the literature on the topic, such as black art (fr. *l'art nègre*), tribal art, indigenous art, the concept of primitive art seems to encompass a full range of the Western references to non-European art – the Other in the world of the Western Art. Today such understanding of the concept would bear many reservations, some of which will be presented in this book. The inverted quotation marks allow a scholar to approach the subject matter with some distance.

This work concerns an issue that puts the collection theory at its center, but also exists at the borderline of museology, aesthetics and the history of art. It follows the paths of anthropology, political science and general history. Such a place is the starting point for the author's deliberations which places "primitive art" related practices at the center of the discourse, whereas the artwork itself will appear in the background.

The book describes the concept of "primitive art" from a perspective of the Western method of classification, analysis and exhibition.

In chapter one the reader will learn about the history of the concept in the context of certain associated ideas (primitive peoples, barbarism, civilization). In this part the author will meticulously analyze the content of various lexicons, dictionaries, and art encyclopedias in order to point out different understanding of the term "primitive art," or to highlight the fact it was ignored altogether. While comparing the lexicon and dictionary entries for the concept the author follows fluctuating contexts, in which the ideas of culture, civilization and art appear in the Western world. The author assumes as the point of departure the colonization of the New World to finish by considering alternatives to the by now controversial term "primitive art", such as "non-European art," which however do not seem to eliminate the definitional problems.

In chapter two the author presents the range of characteristic features of “primitive art” as seen from the Western perspective – its timelessness and anonymity. While examining these features the author casts them against the “primitive art” competence conflict between anthropologists and art historians. The last part of chapter two focuses on an analysis of the “authenticity” of “primitive art” and on unveiling the process of its creation by art collectors, galleries and museums.

Chapter three analyses the methods of classification of the non-European artifacts in the European cabinets of curiosities in XVI to XVIII century. In order to present a historical and cultural background, the author sets out with familiarizing her audience with the contemporary meanings of the terms “wonder”, “curiosity”, or “collection”. She also follows the content of the first treaties forming the basis for classification of the artifacts in the cabinets, such as the treaty of Samuel Quiccheberg from the court of Albrecht V Wittelsbach. The author also points out the contemporary liquidity of classification accepted by Julius von Schlosser at the turn of XIX and XX century, which separated “cabinets of art” (*Kunstammer*) and “cabinets of curiosities” (*Wunderkammer*). Then follows an analysis of the disputes regarding the way of perceiving “exotic objects” from delighting in them as if there were European “wonders”, to marveling about them with a sense of civilizational superiority. This leads her to the conclusion that there was no uniform way of perceiving the Other in the Western world in the “epoch of wonder” and that this vision is protean, closely linked to the intellectual background of the custodians of the private collections owned by magnates. The author specifically analyses the content of the cabinets owned by Prince Cosimo I de Medici (1389–1464) in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Ulisses Aldrovandi (1522–1605), Antonio Giganti (1535–1598), Albrecht V (1550–1579, which became the cornerstone of the Munich museums: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum and Alte Pinakothek), William Courten (1642–1702), inherited and then unified with the collection of his friend sir Hans Sloan (1660–1753), whose collection in turn was bought by the British Parliament to form the basis of the British Museum.

Chapter four describes the process of the great “collecting of the world” which took place in the XIX century – a peak time for colonialism and imperialism. The advancing “acquaintance” of the already “discovered” Other is shown on the examples of the world great exhibitions, which create an impulse to creation of human zoos; the traveling exhibitions of the “primitive peoples” which were extremely popular still in the interwar period. The main ideas through which the contemporary vision of “primitive art” is filtered are “the East”, “Orient,” and “a primitive man”. The author forms an analogy between collecting “primitive peoples” and collecting “primitive art” showing the mutual dependence of the two processes. She notes that without the European fascination with the “human zoos”

there would be no European fascination with “primitive art” – without the Trocadero Museum, Gauguin would not have travelled to Tahiti and Picasso wouldn’t have created *Les Femmes d’Alger*. It is these two artists that the author closely follows at the same time tracking down the path which “primitive art” took to reach the West. She declares Gauguin’s trip to Tahiti in 1891 a breakthrough in the history of contacts between the West and the New World in the sphere of art. That is not due to a revitalized interest in “primitive art” itself but rather due to fascination in the “primitive life”, symbolizing a return to paradise lost. This fascination became a generational experience of Gauguin’s times. In as much as Gauguin implemented the postulate of primitivism (as an attitude) in the lifestyle he chose, Picasso, with his *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907) caused a revolution in thinking about the form and convention of painting. In 1907, the year of creation of *Les Femmes d’Alger*, became the second breakthrough on the road of “primitive art” into the European salons. African masks enabled the Westerners to impersonate the Other, to get acquainted with it, to put on a new face and to transpire into other worlds – and Picasso was fascinated with it.

In chapter five the reader will learn of the process of domestication of the Other, which is enabled by shutting up the Other in glass display cases and classifying “primitive art” a new according to European templates. The term “primitive art” is placed next to some new terms introduced by the postcolonial critics. In this context the processes of the “museumisation of culture” and “museumisation of art” are subjected to a meticulous analysis. These processes led to an artificial separation of the two spheres, resulting in ethnography and art museums. While pointing out the senselessness of such a separation the author shows how it led to a “homelessness” of “primitive art” which is not appropriately reflected in either of those places. The author takes a broader look at the discussion surrounding the opening of Musée du quai Branly (MQB) in Paris in 2006. She discusses the famous 1984 exhibition as an example of ambiguity in displaying “primitive art” in an art museum. The exhibition took place in the Museum of Modern Arts (MoMA) and was titled “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.

In the conclusion, the author gathers different motifs that are woven through the book and presents some new issues focused around three Gauguin questions: *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*

The book as a whole intends to show the overriding process of Western practices applied vis-a-vis “primitive art” and the creation of a “white mythology”¹ about it. For this reason the voice of the “Western people” – that is to say, of the art historians, anthropologists, political scientists, cultural experts – is presented

¹ See the title of the book by R.C.J. Young, *White Mythologies*, London and New York 1990.

in these pages so often (although not only their voice). These people tell us what they thought and think about the Other, and by analogy about us. This way the postulate of “looking into the mirror” and examining closely oneself is fulfilled.

The reader will therefore learn from this book more about the West than about “primitive art,” find out about the dead ends we arrive at when following stereotypes (also certain aesthetic stereotypes), or discover barely visible paths at the end of which one can find entirely new spaces (also in the museum). While entering the unknown land the reader may also discover that *the strangest thing in a strange land is the stranger who visits it...*²

Tłum. Katarzyna Snyder

² An opening phrase from a movie by Dennis O'Rourke *Cannibal Tours* (1987), which ironically portrayed Europeans traveling in Papua New Guinea.